

# Sublime Deceit in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

Thorvald Baarsrud



A Thesis Presented to  
The Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
For the Master of Arts Degree  
Spring 2012

Supervisor: Jakob Lothe

## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, as represented in manifestations of the sublime in the text, conditioned by narrative strategies and reinforced by the continued discursive positioning of the author. My focus is on the ethical implications of telling, rather than on the ethical status of the subject matter of paedophilia. Owing to the wealth of available research material, the discussion is example-driven, focusing on discursive properties that problematize the argument. Similarly, the scope of theoretical enquiry is centred on the most relevant strands of theory within the fields of author theory, narrative theory, and aesthetics.

The thesis' main argument is that the novel's narrative strategies and the discursive positioning of the author are intimately tied to, and shape, the sublime manifestations in the text, in a manner that is specific to literature.

## Acknowledgements

Foremost, I would like to thank Professor Jakob Lothe for finding time in his busy schedule to act as my supervisor. Afraid that my rather confused, yet oddly vivid vision of *my* thesis would be rejected, I had accumulated a fair amount of text by the time I took courage and approached Jakob. However, my fears proved groundless. Jakob's warm, friendly disposition immediately put me at ease, and his thoughtful advice soon provided the focus and overview I had been hoping for. Importantly, he introduced me to James Phelan's narrative theory, which provided me with the connection between seemingly disparate material that I so sorely missed.

I would also like to direct thanks to my family and friends for their continued support; to my mum for fuelling my interest in Bjarne Melgaard's work; to my dad for providing me with a space to write. I will try to repay you all – some literally.

## Contents

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER TWO: NABOKOV AND HUMBERT HUMBERT	22
Nabokov	22
Humbert Humbert	37
CHAPTER THREE: LOLITA AND THE LITERARY SUBLIME	54
Lolita	54
The Literary Sublime	61
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY	87

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Since I first read it in my late teens, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) has remained one of my favourite novels. Unlike other early favourites, such as Bret Easton Ellis' *Glamorama*, it has transgressed my initial taste for the challenging of norms and identification with the outsider. My contention is that controversy in itself cannot sustain a work; rather, the controversial element, in this case sublimation of the subject matter of paedophilia, needs to respond to a search for meaning. The unapologetic ambition of this thesis is to trace the sublime as the source of the novel's longevity, and ultimately, to be able to say something about what makes *Lolita* a great work of art.

My qualitative claim about *Lolita*'s greatness rests on a definition of the sublime that simultaneously confronts and unites aesthetics and ethics. As noted in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, "the source of the sublime lies in the capabilities of the speaker or writer" (Abrams 354). However, in the case of *Lolita* in particular, it is timely to ask whether the apparent sublimation of its subject matter of paedophilia is primarily in the hands of its author, its narrator, or both. My contention is that manifestations of the sublime in *Lolita* can only be properly identified and understood by tracing the agencies that shape them.

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Even though some have deemed *Lolita* dangerous, disgusting, and debasing, many more have found it challenging, provocative, and valuable (Phelan 98). While more recent work has brought ethical issues to the forefront, the novel's critical history was initially dominated by discussions of its aesthetics (Phelan 98). Rhetorical theorist James Phelan describes the debate about the ethics of *Lolita* as an on-going one (Phelan 101). Trevor McNeely divides critical argument of *Lolita* into that based on aesthetics and that based on character, and contends that most commentators take the way of an unprincipled and selective blending of the two approaches (Cornwell 64-65). My suspicion is that the "confused" state of criticism that McNeely refers to stems largely from the ambition to pronounce *Lolita* ethically sound, which allows for a willingness in critics to discard

certain ambiguities that I consider to be inherent to the work. I tend to agree with Phelan's position that ethics and aesthetics are so deeply intertwined in *Lolita* that attempts to give the one precedence over the other will be misguided (Phelan 102-3). In a continuation of the argument, Phelan holds that reactions to the book, not so much involving its subject matter, paedophilia, but rather having the paedophile tell the story, are ultimately ethical (Phelan 98).

While somewhat sympathetic to Phelan's contention, I believe he does not quite hit the mark. That the primary narrator and protagonist, Humbert Humbert, is a paedophile does not in itself pose an ethical problem, in my opinion, as this is disclosed in the foreword, and reiterated repeatedly by the primary narrator. Having Lolita tell her side of the story would similarly not pose a problem in itself. Rather, the agencies contained, or concealed, in the narrative structure constitute a pressing ethical concern: *how does the narrative structure of Lolita affect the reliability of its main protagonist Humbert Humbert?* A second consideration, from an ethical position, is the author's investment in the character and subject matter: *to what degree do Nabokov and Humbert Humbert become one in the telling of Lolita?* A third ethical concern relates to the novel's apparent raising of the subject matter of paedophilia to the dignity of the sublime: *what are the ethical implications of apparent manifestations of the sublime in Lolita?* Addressing the latter, in particular, will serve to counter Phelan's privileging of ethics over aesthetics in his analysis. Finally, in the context of a literary thesis, it would seem timely to ask: *what, if any, aspects of Lolita the novel's treatment of the sublime cannot easily or effectively be transferred to other art forms?*

The above questions, henceforth referred to as research questions, can be summarised in the following problem: *manifestations of the sublime in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita are conditioned by narrative strategies within the text, specific to literature, and their ethical repercussions are intimately tied to the discursive positioning of the author.*

Following the presentations of text, theory, and method below, I will return to the problem statement for further specification and elaboration.

## THE TEXT

As late as 1966, Stanley Edgar Hyman suggested that it was "about time we recognized that Vladimir Nabokov is a novelist of major importance" (qtd. in Rowe vii). Since then,

the general consensus has been that he is. *Lolita* remains by far Nabokov's most popular and successful novel (Clancy 101), figuring on *Time*'s (unranked) list of the "100 best English-language novels published since 1923" (Grossman 51).<sup>1</sup>

Nabokov was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1899. The family fled from Russia in 1917 and settled in Germany, where his father was assassinated in 1922 at the hands of right-wing Russian terrorists. He married Vera Slonin, to which most of his subsequent books were dedicated, in 1925, and their only child, Dmitri, was born nine years later. On account of Vera's Jewish ancestry, they fled first from Germany to France in 1937, then from France to the United States in 1940 (Wood 3).

Soon after his arrival in America, Nabokov abandoned Russian as a language for writing fiction, a predicament that appeared to him as a continuation of the pain he had experienced at the loss of Russia (Wood 3). Russian had become for Nabokov "a language of exile, a language in shadow", and he described the transition as "moving from one darkened house to another" (Wood 4). In order to write the English he wanted to write, Nabokov felt the need to shake off his natural idiom (Wood 4-5). His decision, argues Wood, proved fruitful, as he "had found, through his very loss, a fabulous, freaky, singing, acrobatic, unheard-of English which (probably) made even his most marvellous Russian seem poor" (Wood 5).

Nabokov was fifty-four years old when he finished *Lolita*, his third novel in English, and twelfth overall, in 1953 (Durantaye 3). Upon reading the finished manuscript, a friend and publisher, while confessing that he thought the book was astounding, worried that if he were to publish it, they would both go to jail (Durantaye 3). Anticipating publishing difficulties and embarrassing repercussions, Nabokov initially proposed putting *Lolita* out under an assumed name, but he eventually heeded advice that pseudonymous publication might prejudice American courts against the novel (Cornwell 61-62). Following its rejection by five prominent American publishers in the course of 1954, Nabokov turned to Europe, where *Lolita* was published by the Olympia Press in Paris in 1955 (Cornwell 61-62). Following a number of legal issues that only served to raise the novel's profile, it was eventually published by Putnam's in New York in 1958, and by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in London in 1959 (Cornwell 62). The US edition sold 100,000

---

<sup>1</sup> *TIME*'s time frame does not, as one might suspect, single out the 1922 publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a literary benchmark and reference point for twentieth century literature. Rather, as editor James Kelly points out, 1923 was the year when

copies in its first week, and by the mid-1980s worldwide sales had reached 14 million copies (Cornwell 62-63). The success of the novel transformed Nabokov from a relatively obscure author into a figure of international reputation and significance, with criticism of *Lolita* far surpassing in quantity the sum of that of all of his other works (Clancy 101).

As Durantaye notes, “*Lolita* has been read by millions and written about by thousands” (Durantaye 4). Although, as Clancy observes, the notorious circumstances in which the novel first appeared, along with the nature of its subject matter, is no doubt party to its early success, “no mere fictive material can, by itself, create more than a passing sensation” (Clancy 101). Cornwell argues that the two film versions from 1962 and 1997, directed by Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne respectively, have played “a colossal role in keeping *Lolita* in the public consciousness” (Cornwell 68), though I believe it sensible to view the adaptations as much as the results of the novel’s popularity and continued relevance. Neil Cornwell understands “the *Lolita* phenomenon” as “something broader than just another glance at the text of this particular novel and its controversial reception”, also involving “the noting of assorted pre-texts, a difficult publishing history, a screenplay by Nabokov, two film adaptations, and an ever-raging debate over the ever-sensitive issues of paedophilia and child abuse” (Cornwell 57).

Ostensibly, *Lolita* is a first-person confessional narrative, composed in jail; a chronicle of the protagonist’s obsession with pre- and early teenage girls, his domination and loss of stepdaughter Lolita, acquired through marriage, and the murder of her subsequent abductor (Cornwell 63-64). As Bader notes, the novel’s uniqueness lies partly in perverting the obvious cliché of the affair between the lodger and the full-blown, seductive hostess by casting the vulgar, unromantic twelve-year-old daughter as the object of passion (Bader 63), an aspect that is largely lost in the film adaptations, as I will show.

Morality<sup>2</sup> is a central concern in the novel. John Ray, Jr.’s foreword is, as Bader notes, “an obvious parody of the instructive appreciations that commonly preface works on controversial subjects” (Bader 64). In the Afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov repudiates Ray’s assertion that the novel has a “moral”<sup>3</sup>, and declares that its object is to afford “aesthetic bliss” (Bader 66). The disparity of opinion is covered extensively in my analysis.

---

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the thesis I use ethics to refer to philosophical discussion of moral principles, or assumptions about right and wrong, whereas morals will refer to adopted codes of conduct within a society.

<sup>3</sup> ; a practical lesson



A note discarded during the writing of *Pale Fire* (1962) reads: “Student explains that when reading a novel he likes to skip passages ‘so as to get his own idea about the book and not be influenced by the author’” (Nabokov, qtd. in Wood 15). The joke, suggests Wood, is “a parody in advance of Barthes’ dismissal of the Author” (Wood 16). In the foreword to *Lolita*, referring to Humbert’s memoir, the fictional John Ray, Jr. stipulates that we should be “entranced with the book while abhorring its author” (Nabokov 1997:5). As most readers would find Ray’s advice hard, if not impossible to heed, the implied Nabokov appears here to implicitly dismiss the notion of an autonomous text. Nabokov’s afterword, in which the reader is supplied with the writer’s expressed intentions, along with carefully selected biographical information, points in the same direction.

Wood identifies at least four frequent meanings of the name Nabokov; the historical person, a set of stylized attitudes, certain identifiable habits of writing (or a signature), and a real person (Wood 22), corresponding, respectively, to Nabokov the person, Nabokov the writer, Nabokov the career author, and Nabokov the implied author in my schema. The latter, observes Wood, is “tender and observant” (Wood 22), tending to appear as “the obverse of the haughty public presence” (Wood 22).

Following his death in 1977, Nabokov “disappeared into his name” (Wood 9), as Wood eloquently puts it, suggesting that from that time on, he exists only as a discursive property. He continues: “Like the rest of us, authors die at least twice. Once physically, once notionally; when the heart stops and when the forgetting begins” (Wood 11). Far from having been forgotten, Nabokov is notionally still very much alive, perhaps more than anything through his character-narrator Humbert Humbert.

## THEORY

Bader argues that the theme of artistic creation is a pervasive motif throughout the novel, and that Humbert’s obsession can best be described as “artistic” (Bader 59). I tend to agree. It is the artist, whether in the guise of Humbert the narrator, Nabokov the implied author, or both, that is responsible for the novel’s manifestations of the sublime. The theory presented below will form the basis for the discussions of the nature and ethical implications of manifestations of the sublime in *Lolita*.

Author theory will form the basis for my discussion of the degree of affinity that exists between Nabokov and his character-narrator Humbert. The narrative theory covered

will be applied to the discussion of the reliability of Humbert as narrator. Finally, theory of the sublime will provide a framework for discussing the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in *Lolita*.

The presentation of the theory will centre on the introduction of the key terms and concepts that I use in my discussion of the problem.

## THE AUTHOR

To avoid confusion, I have applied the contemporary literary-critical usage of the terms *text* and *work*, as provided by Jerome J. McGann, to the entirety of this thesis:

[‘Works’] refer to cultural products conceived of as the issue of a large network of persons and institutions which operate over time, in numbers of different places and periods. ‘Texts’ are those cultural products when they are viewed more restrictively, as language structures constituted in specific ways over time by a similar network of persons and institutions. (Goring 431)

In his influential 1967 essay “The Death of the Author”, Roland Barthes argues that the *text* should be regarded as an entity entirely separate from its author:

As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than the very practice of the symbol itself, [a] disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (Barthes, para. 2)

The voice in the text, argues Barthes, is merely its *scriptor*, with no original voice releasing a single meaning, but rather copying and combining quotations drawn from the vast library of culture, and using “words only explainable through other words” (Barthes, para. 5). According to Barthes, the creator of meaning is the reader, the unity of its destination, and not its disparate origins (Barthes, para. 7). Barthes was attempting to free the text from the fixed meanings imposed by the idea of the person of the author as its lone, unified creator, and instead open it up to the multitude of meanings that can only be recognized by the reader (Barthes, para. 7).

In Michel Foucault’s implied response to Barthes’ essay, the perhaps equally influential 1969 lecture “What is an Author?”, Foucault seems to embrace Barthes’ separation of author and text, while at the same time reinstating the author as a *discursive* property. According to Foucault, discourses are “large group of statements” (qtd. in Goring

354) that “systematically shape the objects of which they speak” (qtd. in Maingueneau, para. 18), and made possible by “strategic possibilities [...] at a given moment in history” (Goring 354). In simpler terms, it is text integrated in its context (Østenstad 16). Hence, I understand work and discourse as near synonyms, though with a temporal difference, where the latter constitutes a “snapshot”, or the current constellation, of the former.

In order to adequately understand agency in a poststructural era, Janet Staiger argues, scholars have for some time applied the work of Foucault, Judith Butler, and others to authorship as a technique of the self; a mode of self-fashioning (Staiger 1-2). Foucault identifies the discursive construct of the author with the author’s name: “It has no legal status, nor is it located in the fiction of the work; rather, it is located in the break that founds a certain discursive construct and its very particular mode of being” (Foucault 211). Foucault separates the biographical person, i.e. the instance with a legal status, from Barthes’ scriptor, and goes on to situate the author in the space connecting and separating the two. Dominique Maingueneau additionally separates the biographical *person* (la personne) from the author role, or the *writer* (l’écrivain), who plays out his or her role in the literary field through interviews, essays, etc. (Regard 5, 12). Maingueneau identifies the *inscriptor* (l’inscripteur) as the agency at work in the production of the text, approximating Barthes’ scriptor, but co-existing with the person and the writer rather than exiling them (Østenstad 235). Together, the three agencies of person, writer, and inscriptor constitute the author (Regard 11).

To my mind, the rather mechanical “inscriptor” is hardly a fitting term to describe the agency at work in the production of a literary text. Also, the term conflates text and paratext (text provided by editor, printer or publisher, often long after the text’s production). Accordingly, in a revision of Maingueneau’s typology, I propose to replace the inscriptor with the *implied author*. The latter term, introduced by Wayne C. Booth in 1961, refers to the concept of the author contained, but not explicit, in a text (Schmid, para. 4), as perceived through elements in, or reading experiences of that text (Goring 330):

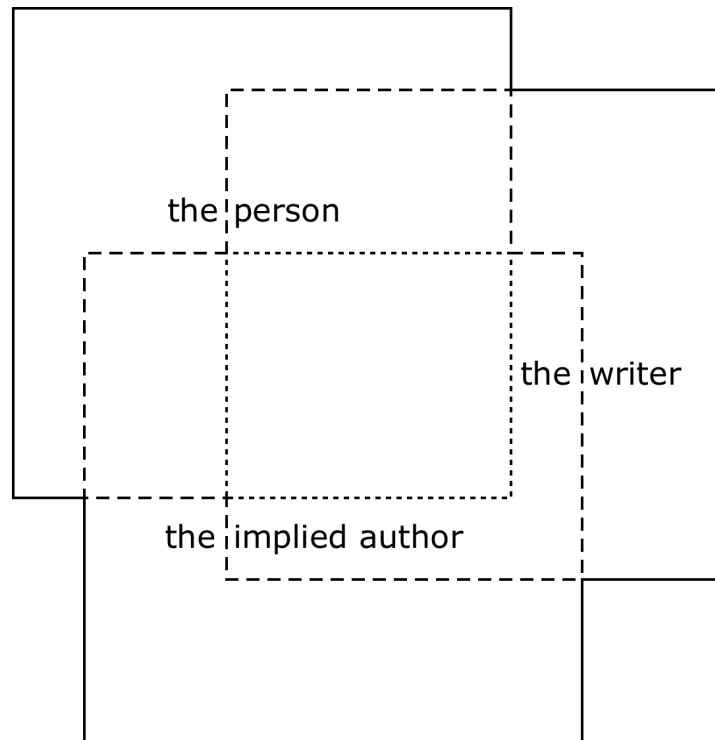
[...] the implied author cannot be modeled as the mouthpiece of the real author. It is not unusual for authors to experiment with their world-views and put their beliefs to the test in their works. [...] it is also possible for the ideological horizons of the implied author to be broader than the more or less constrained ones of the real author.<sup>4</sup> (Schmid, para. 28)

---

<sup>4</sup> The historical or “real” author, of course, is not available to us, only our perceptions of each agency on its own, and combined in the discursive construct of the author.

An author's other implied authors, together constituting the *career author*, each constitutes a separate subjectivity, and should not be treated as part of the agency of the implied author of the given text. Rather, the career author relates to all three agencies of the Author; adding to the psychological profile of the person, making sense of the writer's active positioning, and contextualizing the given text's implied author.

As Maingueneau's thesis goes, the three agencies are interdependent, each one dynamically recreating the other two through discourse (Østenstad 233). If new information arises concerning the author's biography, for example, this may affect not only the status of the person, but also reflect on the writer and the implied author. Similarly, discoveries of *intertextuality*, the overt or diffuse presence of one text within another (Goring 379), could reveal something new about the person, or the writer might consciously re-position him- or herself in relation to the text, which could effect the status of the implied author. The following figure illustrates the interdependence of the agencies of person, writer, and implied author:



*Fig. 1: the discursive construct of the author. The three agencies of person, writer, and implied author are interdependent; if there is movement in one, the configuration is changed, and the centre is shifted.*

The figure's centre represents areas of agreement between how the person lives, what the author states, and what the implied author reveals.

Towards the end of his lecture, Foucault admits to have “unjustifiably” limited his subject, and indicates that the author function in painting, music and other arts should be discussed along similar lines (Foucault 216). Accordingly, this thesis will look to works from other disciplines of the arts to elaborate, clarify, problematize or support the discussion of *Lolita*.

## THE NARRATOR

I understand *narrative* as “the recounting of an event or events [that] can be either real or fictitious” (Goring 396). The category is not restricted to literature, and can be applied to other art forms. However, the selected strands of narrative theory accounted for in the following, selected for their applicability and relevance to the problem, primarily belong to literary theory, and may not always be susceptible to adaptation. I understand the *narrator*

as the “subject position within the text” (Goring 397); a person or entity that recounts an event or events.

Wood holds that it is often possible to name quite precisely the voices we hear in a text, and there is no reason why these voices, in their plurality, should not be those of the author (Wood 20). As already established, the implied author is the concept of the author’s subjectivity contained, but not explicit, in the text. As the agency at work in the text, the implied author must also be regarded as the agency responsible for its narrative structure. Conversely, subjecting the text to a taxonomy of its narrative structure should manifest its elusive implied author. For the purposes of this thesis, the taxonomy outlined will be selective, i.e. not representing all theoretical possibilities, and limited to the categories of *voice* and *focalization*.

Genette believes that the term *point of view* conflates voice, which answers the question “Who is the narrator?” and focalization, which answers the question “Who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?” (Niederhoff, para. 10).

## Voice

A *heterodiegetic* narrator is one who tells a story from which he or she is absent, whereas a *homodiegetic* narrator is present in the story he or she tells (Bal 1991:266). As far as degree of presence goes, some homodiegetic narrators are merely witnesses, whereas the *autodiegetic* narrator tells a story in which he or she is the main character (Bal 1991:266). As well as the relationship to the story he or she tells, outlined above, the status of the narrator is also defined by the *narrative level* that he or she occupies (Bal 1991:266). As Coste and Pier observe, “narrative levels come into play only with a shift of voice” (Coste, para. 7).

*Narrative framing* occurs when one narrating act contains another narrating act, involving a shift from the embedding, *extradiegetic* narrative down to the embedded, *intradiegetic* narrative (Duyfhuizen 187). Whereas Genette arranges narrative levels bottom upwards, Bal inverts the order (as do I), placing the intradiegetic level in a subordinate, or interior (see fig. 2, p. 41) position to the extradiegetic level (Coste, para. 4), arguing that the narrator can see the narrated, and not the other way round (Bal 1981:203-4). The extradiegetic narrator may only minimally be a character in his or her own right, yet his or her necessarily mediating presence as, usually, transcriber and/or

editor critically recontextualizes the intradiegetic narrative (Duyfhuizen 187-88). As Duyfhuizen points out, “using narrative framing both to authenticate and to put into question narrative transmission has been a novelistic feature at least since *Don Quixote*” (Duyfhuizen 188). Narratives embedded within the intradiegetic narrative are referred to as *metadiegetic* narratives. When a narrator from one diegetic level intrudes upon another, calling the distinction between them into question, this contamination of the hierarchical structure is known as *metalepsis* (Pier 303).

## Focalization

Genette defines focalization as “a restriction of ‘field’ [...], a selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called *omniscience*” (qtd. in Niederhoff, para. 8). “While a story is told *from* a particular point of view, a narrative focuses *on* something” (Niederhoff, para. 8), implied by the term itself, as well as Genette’s consistent use of the preposition *on*<sup>5</sup> (Niederhoff, para. 8). Genette distinguishes between three degrees of focalization; *zero focalization* (vision from behind), where the narrator says more than the character can know, *internal focalization* (vision with), where the narrator says only what the character knows, and *external focalization* (vision from without), where the narrator says less than the character knows.

Phelan, arguing that internal focalization conflates the types of focalization available to the autodiegetic narrator, proposes a set of focalization/voice combinations to replace Genette’s typology (Phelan 111-17). While I consider Phelan’s objection to be justified, I agree with Niederhoff’s objection that Phelan, Bal and others confuse focalization with perception (Niederhoff, para. 17),<sup>6</sup> and that their respective revisions of Genette’s taxonomy suffer accordingly.<sup>7</sup> Understanding focalization as “wavering between

---

<sup>5</sup> ; “focalisation *sur*” in French (Niederhoff, para. 8)

<sup>6</sup> Bal and Phelan assume that character and narrators can be focalizers, a notion rejected by Genette and Niederhoff (Niederhoff, para. 19):

To talk about characters as focalizers is to confuse focalization and perception. Characters can see and hear, but they can hardly focalize a narrative of whose existence they are not aware. This leaves us with the narrator (or the author?) as the only focalizer, an inference whose interest is primarily scholastic.  
(Niederhoff, para. 19)

<sup>7</sup> Bal and Phelan both reconceptualise Genette’s typology in terms of focalizing subjects and focalized objects (Phelan 117).

the knowledge and the attitudes of the [...] narrator and the experience of the [...] character” (Niederhoff, para. 20), and noting that a human narrator “cannot report [...] events without also revealing not just a set of attitudes (or slant) but also his or her angle of perception” (Phelan 115), I propose that the following subtypes of internal focalization, derived from Phelan (Phelan 117), be applied to Genette’s typology:

1. *focalization on character*; the narrator is recounting the character’s perceptions and reflections

2. *dual focalization*; the narrator is re-processing/channelling the character’s perceptions and reflections

3. *focalization on narrator*; the narrator is reflecting on the character’s perceptions and reflections

As the narrator can see the narrated, and not the other way round, I consider focalization on character to be subordinate, or interior (see fig. 2, p. 41), to focalization on narrator within a narrative level.

## THE SUBLIME

In my discussion of the problem, I will tie author theory and narrative theory to aesthetics, and more specifically to theories of the sublime. The following survey will lean largely on the detailed history in Philip Shaw’s *The Sublime* (2006), in an outline of what I consider to be a consistent development of the concept, concentrated on strands of theory that I will engage in my discussion of the problem.

Although theoretical discussion of the *sublime* can be traced back as far as Dionysius Longinus’ *On Sublimity*, from the first century CE (Shaw 12), the term continuously seems to evade definition. For Longinus, the discourse of the sublime “produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearer” (qtd. in Shaw 13), thus overcoming the rational powers of its audience (Shaw 4-5). According to Despréaux Boileau, Longinus’ seventeenth-century French translator, it takes a genius to master its use, and a certain “je ne sais quoi” to detect its presence (Shaw 12-13). The apparent lack of appeal to reason or justice immediately raise questions about the ethical status of the sublime (Shaw 14, 26), something Kant later picks up on.



Drawing on Longinus, John Baille (1747) situates sublimity in discourse, and more specifically in the combinatory and associative power of language (Shaw 45, 47). Through the use of metaphor and analogy, disparate entities, both physical and mental objects, can become sublime (Shaw 44, 47). For Edmund Burke (1757), terrifying objects, that which exceeds the evidence of the senses, such hell or death, consume the mind, filling it with darkness and confusion (Shaw 50-52); yet the mind always claims some part of the dignity and importance of the objects which it contemplates, in turn producing a sense of triumph (Shaw 55). At the same time, Shaw asserts, drawing on Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the sublime is "always on the brink of conversion into customary beauty" (Shaw 60), through "the vitiating effects of 'custom'" (Shaw 59).

With Immanuel Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime", from *Critique of Judgement* (1790), the emphasis shifts to regarding the sublime as a mode of consciousness (Shaw 6). Kant describes the feeling of the sublime as alternating between attraction and repulsion (Shaw 72, 78-79). Thus, according to Kant, the sublime appears to frustrate judgement, calling its very autonomy into question (Shaw 78). Indeed, for Reynolds (1785), Shaw comments, the sublime "marks the limits of human conception, the point at which reason gives way to madness" (Shaw 46).

The *social fantastic* denotes the mysterious dimension of reality encountered each day in the modern city, when the archaic and the modern, or the human and the inanimate, are juxtapositioned, opening "a window into the realm of another aspect of the everyday" (Phillips 101-2). The term was coined by French poet and novelist Pierre Mac Orlan (1929), taking his cue from surrealist painter Fernand Léger who, when confronted with a modern billboard in the countryside, had experienced a "shock of contrast". Similarly, photographer André Kertész had noticed the correspondence between the cutout figures of an advertising display and anonymous passers-by. According to Orlan, it was photographers who had the tools best suited to explore this mysterious dimension of modern society (Phillips 101-2). In film noir, movies typically concerned with gangsterism and murder, urban decor is frequently bestowed with an aura of the marvellous (Naremore 18). In a famous scene in *Double Indemnity* (1944), the anti-hero and femme fatale conspire to murder while walking along the aisles of a supermarket.

The *Imaginary*, introduced by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1949), denotes a state of being wherein the subject remains convinced that a sense of wholeness, something Lacan rejects as an illusion due to an inherent split in symbolization between *I* as subject

and *I* as object, is possible (Shaw 132-33). Unable to find this sense of wholeness within him- or herself, the subject as lover desires in the beloved object more than the beloved, namely the beloved's incorporation in the subject's symbolic universe (Shaw 144).

In *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* (2000), neo-Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek applies Lacan's theory to David Lynch's neo-noir film *Lost Highway* (1997). In the first half of the film, the apparently impotent Fred is married to the apparently adulterous Renee, for whose murder he is eventually arrested; in the second half, Fred, transformed into the younger, virile Pete, pursues the enigmatic Alice, a blond reincarnation of Renee (Shaw 142-43). They have passionate sex, after which Renee whispers into Pete's ear "You'll never have me!" and enters a wooden house, which promptly goes up in flames (Shaw 143). Alice, in Žižek's reading, is the impossible, sublime object, whereas Renee, the object encountered in her substance, is reduced from object to abject (Shaw 145). Whereas the former disappears as a result of her impossibility, the latter is murdered for her unavailability (Shaw 144).

Lynch appears to re-visit the theme with *Mulholland Drive* (2001): in the first, dreamlike half of the film, the naive Betty moves to Hollywood to pursue an acting career, enters an audition for a movie, and is promptly cast as its lead. The mysterious, amnesiac Rita enters her life, and they become lovers. Rita at one point remembers the name Diane Selwyn, and having tracked down her apartment, they find Diane's dead body. As they go into hiding, Rita dons a blond wig, resembling Betty's hair, as a disguise. In the film's second half, Betty is reincarnated as failed actress Diane Selwyn, who is in love, unrequited, as it appears, with the successful Camilla, the reincarnation of Rita. After hiring a hit man to murder Camilla, Diane returns to her flat and shoots herself (*Mulholland Drive*).

Once applied to Lacan and Žižek, my analysis of *Mulholland Drive* largely falls into line with Žižek's treatment of *Lost Highway*. In Diane's imagined reality, she is the implausible Betty, the *I* as object, who experiences wholeness in her relationship with Rita, the beloved. The appearance of Diane, the *I* as subject, as a corpse in the film's first half stresses Lacan's assertion that oneness with the beloved can only be attained in death (Shaw 144).

Like the Burkean philosophical sublime, Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the Imaginary cannot be proved, yet I find Žižek's application convincing, and the terminology it affords immensely useful. However, I feel obliged to clarify that my

employment of Lacan's terminology is far from indicative of a wholesale backing of Lacan's work.

The sublime, as Shaw suggests in the introduction to *The Sublime*, may finally be regarded as a form of deceit: "Perhaps the sublime is irony at its purest and most effective: a promise of transcendence leading to the edge of an abyss" (Shaw 10). In the work of German artist Mariele Neudecker (b. 1965), elaborate dioramas invite the viewer to enter landscapes of hidden depths and infinite space; once approached, however, their support structures are exposed, shattering the illusions and revealing the constructed nature of the sublime (Shaw 7).

## METHOD

Studies of Nabokov's work, and *Lolita* in particular, have produced such a wide array of texts that it would seem sensible, at the outset, to limit the scope of this thesis to one that may provide some degree of overview and substance. I will combine selected strands of aesthetic and literary theory, as presented above, and engage them with *Lolita* as text and discourse. *Lolita* the text will be subjected to close reading, whereas analysis of *Lolita* the discourse will, in a less exhaustive capacity, draw on secondary material. Specific examples from other disciplines will undergo similar, more limited treatment, before being compared and contrasted with the results from my analysis of *Lolita*.

I view my qualitative approach as an opportunity to really engage with specific problems, rather than merely compare texts on a more general level. My aim, ultimately, is to suggest interpretive possibilities rather than to stipulate rules of engagement.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT REVISITED

Having presented the text, along with the theory and method to which it will be subjected, it would seem timely to specify and elaborate on the problem statement. The problem reads as follows: *manifestations of the sublime in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita are conditioned by narrative strategies within the text, specific to literature, and their ethical repercussions are intimately tied to the discursive positioning of the author.*

To address the problem, I have devised four research questions, the first of which reads: *to what degree does Nabokov and Humbert Humbert become one in the telling of Lolita?* The author's affinity with his character-narrator will be analysed largely by

focusing on the interplay between the agencies of writer, implied author, and person in *Lolita* the discourse, but also by engaging with the text in close reading. First, I will analyse Nabokov the writer's statements about Humbert, look to other works by Nabokov for thematic semblance with *Lolita*, and compare and contrast Nabokov's biography with that of Humbert. Second, I will look at how intertextual references in *Lolita* play into the Nabokov-Humbert relationship. Third, I will examine the degree to which discourse continue to shape our perception of Nabokov and Humbert.

The second research question reads: *how does the narrative structure of Lolita affect the reliability of its main protagonist Humbert Humbert?* My analysis will engage narrative theory with close reading of the novel. First, I will look at how the narrative techniques in *Lolita* affect the reliability of Humbert the narrator, focusing on focalization and narrative levels, specifically. Second, I will debate Humbert's part in maintaining the stability of the narrative hierarchy. Third, I will discuss the effects of an apparent chronological discrepancy, which effectively reshuffles the narrative hierarchy, in turn profoundly affecting the reliability of Humbert.

The third research question reads: *what are the ethical implications of apparent manifestations of the sublime in Lolita?* In my analysis, I will engage aesthetic theory with a close reading of *Lolita*, tracing the sublime on an axis of aesthetics and ethics; from accounts of pleasure and transgression on the one end, to elaborate deceit on the other.

The fourth research question reads: *what, if any, aspects of Lolita the novel's treatment of the sublime cannot easily or effectively be transferred to other art forms?* I will briefly analyse the two film adaptations of *Lolita* with a view to evaluate their success in translating the novel's configurations of author, narrative hierarchy, and sublime manifestations. Specific examples from the disciplines of film and painting will then be engaged with author theory, narrative theory, and aesthetics, and subjected to a comparison with my analysis of *Lolita*, wherein the relevance and effectiveness of literature will be taken to task. My reasoning for focusing on film and painting, besides prior knowledge of the selected works, comes down to the appearance of narrative similarities with the novel, indicating a degree of adaptability.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The focus of the thesis is on *Lolita*, and the premise for, realization of, and ethical repercussions of, manifestations of the sublime in the text of the novel. My theoretical

scope is limited to specific strands of author theory, narrative theory, and aesthetics, that I consider best suited to address the problem. The discussion of ethics will centre on the sublimation of paedophilia, rather than on paedophilia as such. An extended, philosophical discussion about ethics is beyond the scope of the thesis. Similarly, there will be only limited engagement with film and art theory, as the focus of the thesis remains literary.

## OUTLINE OF THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS

The second chapter will discuss the first two research questions, concerning theories of author and narrator. In the author portion, Lewis Carroll's work and biography provide the main example, whereas in the portion concerned with narrative theory, special attention will be given to discussion of James Phelan's analysis of focalization in *Lolita*. The third chapter will handle the two remaining research questions, concerning the sublime. My analysis will marry seemingly disparate strands of the sublime, leaning largely on Philip Shaw's detailed history of the concept. Drawing on my findings about the relationship between author and narrator, I should be better equipped to evaluate the ethical repercussions of sublime manifestations in *Lolita*. Using examples from film; Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, and painting; Bjarne Melgaard's *Jealous*, I will debate the particularities of literature as a vessel for the sublime. The concluding, fourth chapter will attempt to sum up and evaluate the findings of the previous chapters.

## CHAPTER TWO: NABOKOV AND HUMBERT HUMBERT

The perceived affinity between Nabokov the implied author and Humbert the character is, along with the degree of unreliability attributed to Humbert the narrator, intimately tied to the ethical status of the apparent manifestations of the sublime in *Lolita*. The first part of the chapter will relate to author theory, at the level of the work, whereas the second part of the chapter will relate to narrative theory, at the level of the text.

### NABOKOV

In a BBC interview from 1962, Nabokov describes the theme of the novel as “so distant, so remote, from my own emotional life that it gave me a special pleasure to use my combinational talent to make it real” (qtd. in Bancroft, para. 11). Yet, according to Durantaye, many have suggested that Nabokov may have taken the story “from the realm of his own desires” (Durantaye 97). We cannot simply take Nabokov the writer’s word for it. In order to establish a proper sense of Nabokov’s affinity with the paedophile primary narrator, we will need to look at the interplay between writer, implied author, and person. What we are looking for is not the inner workings of the “real” author, as this is not, nor was it ever, available to us. What we are looking for is the perception of such, attained through analysis of the discursive construct of the author, a mode of self-fashioning achieved through the interplay between Nabokov the writer, playing out his role in essays, articles, and interviews; Nabokov the career author, i.e. the implied authors of his literary texts; and Nabokov the biographical person, perceived through knowledge of his biography.

When asked by Gold what he would most like to do, besides writing novels, Nabokov replies: “Oh, hunting butterflies, of course, and studying them. The pleasures and rewards of literary inspiration are nothing beside the rapture of discovering a new organ under the microscope or an undescribed species on a mountainside in Iran or Peru” (Gold, para. 50). Humbert terms his idealized, pubescent objects of desire *nymphets*, recalling the

nymphs of Greek mythology, creatures of nature sometimes, in later incarnations, depicted with insect wings. Nabokov's and Humbert's passion seems to have been consciously fused, in an exercise of empathy through identification. It could be argued, however, that the connection is merely on an aesthetic level, as nymphets and butterflies represent different stages of development. Whereas nymphets are described as pre-pubescent girls who lose their enigmatic power as womanhood takes over, butterflies, having left puppethood and metamorphosis behind, are arguably more representative, symbolically, of full-blown women. Arguably, the surface, merely aesthetic level of connection between nymphets, if we appropriate Humbert's term, and butterflies is symptomatic of Humbert's use of allusion throughout the novel.

G. M. Hyde notes how Nabokov has often been oddly unfair to Humbert in comments about him (Hyde 109). In a 1967 Paris Review interview with Herbert Gold, in response to Gold's assertion that "Humbert, while comic, retains a touching and insistent quality", Nabokov offers: "I would put it differently: Humbert Humbert is a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear 'touching'" (Gold, para. 14). One possible explanation for Nabokov's harsh remarks, as Robert Yates of *The Observer* observes, is that Nabokov "had his censors to appease" (Yates, para 5). On the other hand, Nabokov's response is consistent with a reading of Humbert's narration as elaborate deceit, to which I will return. In the same interview, Nabokov repudiates the sense of immorality of the relationship between Humbert and Lolita that is attributed to him: "No, it is not *my* sense of the immorality of the Humbert-Lolita relationship that is strong; it is Humbert's sense. He cares, I do not. I do not give a damn for public morals, in America or elsewhere" (Gold, para 8). Nabokov the writer, then, seems to imply that it is not merely on account of paedophilia, and its practice, that Humbert is "cruel".

While critics such as Richard Rorty, Peter Levine, and Gerard de Vries have argued that Nabokov rejected general moral principles, favouring a context-based, anti-Kantian version of morality, Dragunoiu reads Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), a novel concerning the lifelong love affair between Van Veen and his sister Ada, as an endorsement of Kantian moral standards (Dragunoiu 312). While Kant's reproductive objections to incest are brushed aside by Van's sterility, the demands for absolute equality between partners, to prevent the degradation of the weaker partner's dignity, is met by emphasizing the physical, intellectual and sexual similarities between the siblings (Dragunoiu 333-34). Tried against Kant, neither Humbert's perception that Lolita initially seduces him, having already lost her virginity at summer camp, nor his references to the

tolerant sexual practices of certain cultures, can vindicate his relationship with Lolita (Dragunoiu 332, 335). If we separate between moral principles and public morals, Dragunoiu's analysis about Nabokov's endorsement of the former does not appear to be in conflict with Nabokov's statements about the latter in the Paris Review interview. In *The Magician's Doubts* (1994), Wood holds that Nabokov "is neither the aesthete that he himself and his early readers kept making out he was, nor the plodding moralist that recent criticism, with an audible sigh of relief, has wheeled on to the page" (Wood 7).

Bader notes that Humbert "has a certain consistency of tone and characterization: he does not fade into the paper-mâché backdrop, nor does he 'peter out' to merge and disappear into his creator, as do most other Nabokovian main characters" (Bader 58). Humbert is, according to Clancy, notable among Nabokov's narrators for approaching the wit, intelligence and vocabulary of his creator (Clancy 110). In a 1969 interview with *TIME* magazine, Nabokov declares that he has "never seen a more lucid, more lonely, better balanced mad mind" than his own (Rowe 162). Humbert, identifying himself as "an artist and a madman" (Nabokov 1997:16-17), shares Nabokov's view of himself.

Hyde identifies a common preoccupation in nineteenth-century Russian fiction with the problematics of the relationship between the writer and his hero, typically an alter ego sharing with his creator positive traits of intelligence, sensitivity, and conscience, as well as negative traits, such as phony nobility of soul (Hyde 99-100). Nabokov clearly honours this tradition in his work. The Jewish Chronicle's John Nathan describes Humbert as "a man who possesses the witty charm that only comes with self-deprecation" (Nathan, para. 2), recalling Nabokov in the Paris Review interview: "Nobody can decide if I am a middle-aged American writer or an old Russian writer — or an ageless international freak" (Gold, para. 84). If Gold's introduction to the interview is anything to go by, Nabokov may well have been fuelling the "confusion" with his own statements:

There is no doubt that Nabokov feels as a tragic loss the conspiracy of history that deprived him of his native Russia, and that brought him in middle life to doing his life's work in a language that is not that of his first dreams. However, his frequent apologies for his grasp of English clearly belong in the context of Nabokov's special mournful joking: he means it, he does not mean it, he is grieving for his loss, he is outraged if anyone criticizes his style, he pretends to be just a poor lonely foreigner, he is as American "as April in Arizona." (Gold, para. 3)

Much like Nabokov's stilted performance in interviews, Humbert's carefully cultivated alien accent, with scarcely a page escaping a slither into French, seems designated to make



sure he is not confused with the natives. This, of course, there is little danger of in the first place, making the affectation decidedly comical (Wood 112-13). Alfred Appel applied the phrase “colloquial baroque” for the language of *Lolita* (Wood 110), and Nabokov is not far off, be it in interviews and essays, or in his novels.

Humbert Humbert was born in Paris, France, to an English mother and a Swiss father, of French and Austrian descent (Nabokov 1997:9). Humbert was a college student in London and Paris, first in psychology, then English literature (Nabokov 1997:15), and eventually moves to the States in 1940 (Nabokov 1997:32). Nabokov, born in Russia, studied French and Russian literature at Cambridge, then lived in Berlin and Paris, before eventually moving to the States in 1940 (Nabokov 1997:back cover). Humbert, too, is an artist in exile, and culturally, historically, and even biographically, his reference system would appear to resemble closely that of his creator. The many nicknames afforded Dolores (Lo, Lola, Dolly, Lolita) occurs to me a Russian tradition that ought to be foreign to Humbert, who has no Russian ties, thus appearing as an author’s metalepsis. Although likely not intended, it serves as a useful indication that Nabokov is trying his best to identify with Humbert.

The essay “Vladimir Nabokov: On a book entitled *Lolita*”, written in November of 1956, was included in the American edition, as well as all later editions of the novel (Wood 105), and is most often referred to as its afterword. It starts off with the following observation: “After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one – may strike me, in fact – as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book” (Nabokov 1997:311). Nabokov on the page, joined to the text of his novel, is no less ghostly than his characters, Wood feels, except that authors have flesh-and-blood histories and documentable lives (Wood 105). The essay demonstrates the disparity between Nabokov the implied author, who plays out his part in the text of the novel, Nabokov the writer, who seeks to amend the reception of the novel, and Nabokov the person, who is the writer’s flesh-and-blood guarantor.

In Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory*, there is an account of a doomed love between the ten-year-old boy and a girl of the same age on the beaches of Biarritz. As with Humbert and Annabel, there is a sense of irreparable and premature loss (Clancy 103). As Wood observes, “the girl of the secret summer meetings is agreeable but conventional”, “the girl of their partings each night is livelier and more vividly imagined”, and “the girl of the ‘last glimpse’ is genuinely haunting”, but it is “the girl of the lost letters, the person

whose letters, Nabokov believes, continue to reach the Crimea after he and his family have left for good”, that is the most moving (Wood 95). He did not love her in order to lose her, offers Wood, but he “loved the chance of loss; he loved what he *could* lose, which is perhaps what we really love in anyone or anything” (Wood 96). Again, we see how elements of Nabokov’s biography are weaved into Humbert’s memoir, signalling Nabokov’s willingness to establish an affinity with his character-narrator.

The theme of intense and ill-fated love, sometimes between children, sometimes between a very young girl and an older man, is a recurrent one in Nabokov’s novels (Clancy 103). In his novella *The Enchanter*, written in 1939, but only published posthumously, a middle-aged man marries a woman to gain access to her twelve-year-old daughter (Cornwell 58). In his 1947 novel *Bend Sinister*, the protagonist dreams about his teenage housemaid, “surreptitiously” enjoying her while she is sitting on his lap, wincing (Cornwell 59), recalling the famous davenport scene in *Lolita* (returned to below).

In the first chapter of Nabokov’s *The Original of Laura: A novel in fragments* (2009), released posthumously and against Nabokov’s dying wish, the narrating-I describes Flora’s features in the following manner: “The cup-sized breasts of that twenty-four year old impatient beauty seemed a dozen years younger than she, with those pale squinty nipples and firm form” (Nabokov 2008:15). Considering Nabokov’s enduring preoccupation with nymphets and their admirers, the affinity between the narrating-I and the implied author here again comes into question. In chapter two of *Laura*, the elderly Englishman Hubert H. Hubert courts Madame Lanskaya, all the while prowling around her twelve-year-old daughter Flora. When Flora is laid up with a cold, Humbert takes advantage of her indisposition:

Then, with a father’s sudden concern, he said “I’m afraid you are chilly, my love,” and plunging a hand under the bedclothes from his vantage point at the footboard. He felt her shins[.] Flora uttered a yelp and then a few screams. [...] As he lurched aside, the teapot, a saucer of raspberry jam, an[d] several tiny chessmen joined in the silly fray. (Nabokov 2008:71, 73)

Along with the obvious allusions to *Lolita*, the tumbling teapot, saucer, and chess pieces could well be more subtle references to Carroll’s *Alice* books,<sup>8</sup> the significance of which will be addressed shortly.

---

<sup>8</sup> The “Mad Tea Party” of the first book; the chess puzzles that frame the second book

Phelan observes that, like *Lolita*, Nabokov “enters umber and black Humberland, but unlike her, he does not survey it with a shrug of amused distaste, but rather lives there with a kind of perverse relish” (Phelan 131). Durantaye suggests that in impersonating Humbert, Nabokov may himself have been “surprised, subdued, or seduced by the sins he depicts” (Durantaye 96). Wurtzel notes that Woody Allen’s famous May-December line from *Manhattan*, “I can’t believe I’m dating a girl who does homework”, became “much funnier, or much sadder, when its real-life implications were realized” (Wurtzel, para. 7).

Nabokov the career author’s investment in the subject matter of paedophilia, spanning roughly 40 years, certainly attests to more than a passing interest, and, though not reflected in what we know of his biography, has bearing on our perception of Nabokov the person.

Durantaye notes that a constant in the criticism of *Lolita* is recognition of uneasy empathy with Humbert (Durantaye 7). *Lolita* does not present us with the stereotypical image of the child molester, feeble-minded or feeble-bodied; instead, Humbert presents himself in disarmingly human guise, devoid of the familiar, demonizing traits of the template we have come to expect from newspaper accounts or handbooks on sexual pathology (Durantaye 12-13). He is dressed in all the attributes of cultivation and attractiveness; he is intelligent, eloquent, charming, witty, handsome, robust, and “not plagued by fears that he is weaker or less potent than those around him” (Durantaye 13). What could have motivated Nabokov to not guide the reader to dislike Humbert? As suggested above, and reiterated in the following, I will argue that *Lolita* should be read as an exercise in empathy.

“CARROLL CARROLL”

“*Lolita* is one of the richest texts in twentieth-century literature in its use of quotation and allusion”, states Cornwell (Cornwell 63). According to Bader, “there has been no novel so densely packed with literary and cultural allusions since *Ulysses*” (Clancy 114), a novel considered by some to be *Lolita*’s “only rival as *the* masterpiece of 20th-century English literature” (Busack, para. 5). Extratextual references and internal reverberations continue to be pinpointed and elaborated, including Poe, Mérimée, Proust, Shakespeare, Goethe, de Sade, Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Freud, and Dostoevsky (Cornwell 63). Often overlooked, though arguably significant in this regard, is Charles Dodgson, better known by his pseudonym

Lewis Carroll, whose *Alice in Wonderland* Nabokov translated into Russian in 1924 (Cornwell 57).

In *Lolita*, lighted windows seen through trees of the garden of Humbert's adventures with Annabel later appear to him "like playing cards" (Nabokov 1997:14). While Lolita is away at summer camp, Humbert recalls how she used to visit him in dirty clothes, "smelling of orchards in nymphetland" (Nabokov 1997:92). Although, in addition to the above examples, there are some overt intertextual references to the *Alice* books, such as "Humberland" (Nabokov 1997:166) and "wonderland" (Nabokov 1997:131, 166, 264), their presence in *Lolita* is felt predominantly through style and manner.

Carroll demonstrates that sound and feeling are as, or more, important than sense and meaning, ventures Cohen, noting that Joyce knew the *Alice* books well (Cohen 143). Arguably, Nabokov would have known them even better. Humbert enjoys jokey off rhymes such as trips/traps (Nabokov 1997:154) and drumlins/gremlins/kremlins (Nabokov 1997:33-34), and the musical pairing of typhus and Corfu (Nabokov 1997:13), amounting to what the fictional poet John Shade, in *Pale Fire*, calls "a feeling of fantastically planned, richly rhymed life" (Nabokov, qtd. in Wood 111). At one point, Wood notes, Humbert suggests that the difference between "the rapist" and "therapist" comes down to conventions of spacing (Nabokov 1997:113 qtd. in Wood 111), then, in the very next chapter, goes on to poignantly call upon "the child therapist in me" (Nabokov 1997:124 qtd. in Wood 111). "Humbert's dandyish taste for alliteration", notes Wood, "is so thoroughly indulged that he becomes almost unreadable at times" (Wood 112). In a particularly colourful play with words, Humbert describes Lolita, or Dolores Haze, as she appears "on the dotted line" (Nabokov 1997:9), as "my dolorous and hazy darling" (Nabokov 1997:53). Later on, in the davenport scene, Humbert, with a popular song as a starting point, invents rhymes that keeps Lolita "under its special spell"; part non-sense, such as "the stars that sparkled, and the cars that parkled", intensifying with "barmen, alarmin', my charmin', my carmen, ahmen, ahahamen" as Humbert is nearing orgasm (Nabokov 1997:59-60). Following her escape, Humbert recalls "the rather charming non-sense verse I used to write her when she was a child" (Nabokov 1997:254-55).

A feature of the *Alice* books related to the constant play with words, are their frequent riddles and math puzzles. In *Lolita*, the riddle that answers the question about the year of Humbert's first love; "About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer" (Nabokov 1997:9), has an ornate relevance, since apart from its answer,

1923, it places Humbert's age at the time as 12, going on 13; Lolita's age when Humbert first encounters her (Wood 109).

According to Cohen, though, Carroll's most successful device is laughter (Cohen 140). The same can be said for Humbert, whose humour makes him seem more humane, and his crimes less severe. Humour, and sarcasm in particular, appears frequently to question "common sense" in the *Alice* books; Humbert employs the same device to implicitly question his adversaries. Humbert calls Valeria a "figure of fun" (Nabokov 1997:27-28), which is certainly the way he portrays Charlotte as well, repeatedly referred to as "the Haze woman" (Nabokov 1997:56). Though his disregard for either woman's feelings is clearly a flaw in his personality, Humbert's humorous accounts, with their inherent emotional distance, not only makes the abuse bearable for the reader, but also turns him into Humbert's accomplice. By contrast, Humbert describes Charlotte Haze as a very conventional, superficial woman, who is "devoid of humor" (Nabokov 1997:37).

Cohen puts the *Alice* books' timeless appeal down to the fact that, contrary to most children's literature, they have no moral, as Dodgson himself writes in a letter to a young friend in 1867, while characterizing a more conventional children book: "The book has got a moral – so I need hardly say it is *not* by Lewis Carroll" (Cohen 142). In *Wonderland*, the characters do not live by conventional rules, and in chapter IX of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, much like morality is parodied in John Ray, Jr.'s foreword in *Lolita*, Carroll parodies the very practice of adult moralizing (Cohen 142-43):

She had quite forgotten the Duchess by this time, and was a little startled when she heard her voice close to her ear. "You're thinking about something, my dear, and that makes you forget to talk. I can't tell you just now what the moral of that is, but I shall remember it in a bit."

"Perhaps it hasn't one," Alice ventured to remark.

"Tut, tut, child!" said the Duchess. "Every thing's got a moral, if only you can find it." (Carroll 78)

In 1966, Nabokov told *Vogue* magazine: "I always call him Lewis Carroll Carroll, because he was the first Humbert Humbert" (Prioleau 428). Carroll's intertextual presence in *Lolita*, then, goes beyond his books, for, as I will show, not only does there seem to be an affinity between Carroll and Nabokov; Humbert appears to have been partly modelled on Dodgson.

In the poem that concludes *Through the Looking-Glass*, one verse reads: "Still she haunts me, phantomwise, Alice moving under skies. Never seen by waking eyes (Carroll

241). Following *Lolita*'s escape, Humbert reports that she haunts his sleep (Nabokov 1997:254), as did the memories of Annabel before her (Nabokov 1997:15).

Henry George Liddell was dean at Christ Church, Oxford, when Dodgson joined the college as mathematical lecturer in 1855 (Cohen 57-58). Dodgson first met their youngest child Alice, then just shy of four years old, on April 25, 1856 (Cohen 60). He soon became a frequent visitor at the deanery, where he would meet with, and photograph the children, most often in the presence of their governess, Miss Prickett, who would allow Charles to visit the children at times when the Liddells had been less amenable (Cohen 61, 69). The time spent with the children, including river expeditions, walks, and croquet games, all provided Dodgson with raw material for the *Alice* books (Cohen 99). On June 25, 1863, Dodgson's diary entry relates his thrill at, perhaps for the first and only time, having the children to himself (Cohen 99):

We had tea under the trees at Nuneham, after which the rest drove home in the carriage [...] while Ina, Alice, Edith, and I (mirabile dictu!<sup>9</sup>) walked down to [the] [...] station, and so home by railway: a pleasant expedition with a very pleasant conclusion. (Cohen 99)

No records appear in Dodgson's diary for June 27-29; his accounts of these dates were later cut out by his niece Menella Dodgson, by her own admission, presumably because they contained information that could prove detrimental to Dodgson's legacy (Cohen 100). We can only assume that Dodgson somehow offended and was exiled, as no further visits follow, and there is not a single mention of a Liddell in Dodgson's diary for months afterward (Cohen 100, 103). In a letter to Alice from her older sister Ina, dated May 2, 1930, Ina relates what she told Florence Becker Lennon, who was writing a book on Dodgson, about the events that led to Dodgson's exile from the deanery (Cohen 103):

I said his manner became too affectionate to you as you grew older and that mother spoke to him about it, and that offended him so he ceased coming to visit us again – as one had to find some reason for all intercourse ceasing [...] Mr. D. used to take you on his knee [...] I did *not* say that!" (Cohen 103)

The withheld information hints, perhaps, at something approaching the davenport scene in *Lolita*. Reviewing Dodgson's diary entries, Cohen has singled out the ones dominated by self-examination and repentance, finding that the largest cluster, by far, occurs from 1962

---

<sup>9</sup> from latin: wonderful to relate ("mirabile dictu" 911)

to 1967 (Cohen 202-5).<sup>10</sup> Though the entries are of an often non-specific nature, bearing witness of inner torment and the struggle to live closer to God, their coinciding with Dodgson's involvement with, and eventual exile from the Liddells are hardly a coincidence (Cohen 203, 205-7).

Edward Guiliano cites Lewis Carroll as “one of the most outstanding photographers in the nineteenth century, [...] one of the few earlier photographers who elevated picture-taking from a rather mechanical process to an art form” (Guiliano 45). It is his photographs of little girls that set him apart from his contemporary photographers, with renowned historian of photography Helmut Gernsheim heralding Carroll as the most outstanding nineteenth-century photographer of children (Guiliano 47-48). “One of the most haunting qualities of many of his photographs is a dreaminess and preoccupation with each sitter's private world”, observes Guiliano (Guiliano 48). Guiliano suggests that the most obvious explanation for Carroll's interest in photography is that it provided him with a channel to express himself visually (Guiliano 47). Judging by the evidence of the diaries, I suspect his purpose was as much to gain access to little girls, even though it may not have been what initially got him started. In the photographs, like in Tenniel's drawings, Sally Mann's photography, to which I will return, or conjured by Humbert's descriptions of Lolita, Alice's expression is always one of self-assured defiance, whether dressed up as “Beggar Girl” in a tattered dress (Cohen 63), or as geisha in “the Chinese group” (Cohen 66). The former is reimagined by Nabokov in Lolita's first appearance; her shoulders and back bare, with a “kerchief tied around her chest”, appearing to Humbert as if “discovered in gypsy rags” (Nabokov 1997:39).

Increasingly, Dodgson would photograph his sitters with little, or no dress at all (Cohen 165). A diary entry from May 21, 1867, reads: “Mrs. Latham brought Beatrice, and I took photographs of the two, and several of Beatrice alone, *sans habillement*” (Cohen 165). The French, positively Humbertian phrase accentuates Dodgson's pleasure with the event. Lists recorded in Dodgson's diary, dating from the early 1860's through to the early 1890's, of his “child-friends”, listed alphabetically (Cohen 160-61), are eerily reminiscent of Humbert's obsessing over Lolita's class list (Nabokov 1997:51-53), reproduced in “exhibit number two”; Humbert's diary (Nabokov 1997:40). Dodgson destroyed most of the negatives and prints of his nude photography before his death, and ordered his executors to destroy those that remained; only four have since come to light (Cohen 165).

---

<sup>10</sup> There are no entries for the four preceding years (Cohen 202).

While Cohen suggests that Dodgson's alleged paedophilia might stem from childhood experiences, he seems to have little to back up his claim except referring to general research on the subject. Dodgson's childhood, like so many others at the time, may have been governed by rules and regulations, but Dodgson's parents are described as nothing but gentle and loving (Cohen 193), much like Humbert describes his father; "gentle, easy-going" (Nabokov 1997:9), and raising "a happy, healthy child" (Nabokov 1997:10).

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, penned after Dodgson's exile from the Liddells, Dodgson, in the guise of the White Knight, sings Alice a melancholy song before she leaves him to go in search of queenhood (Cohen 215). The narrator tells us: "Of all the strange things that Alice saw in her journey Through The Looking-Glass, this was the one that she always remembered most clearly. Years afterwards she could bring the whole scene back again, as if it had been only yesterday [...]" (Carroll 214). Besides interjecting himself into the story, playing several pitiful characters in the *Alice* books (Cohen 215, 217), Carroll, in the above quote, writes himself into Alice's memory. As I will show in chapter three, Humbert, too, immortalizes his relationship with Lolita through writing.

While Nabokov's respect for, and affinity with, Lewis Carroll the writer, whose style and manner is adopted by Humbert, is evident, his attitude towards the person, Charles Dodgson, remains in question.

## NABOKOV AFTER NABOKOV

Wood holds that "to write is not to be absent but to become absent; to be someone and then go away, leaving traces" (Wood 18). Though Nabokov the flesh-and-blood person is dead, the perception of him is not. Nabokov the person, Nabokov the writer, and *Lolita*'s implied Nabokov dynamically recreate each other through discourse. *Lolita*'s continued presence in other works, literary or non-literary, and in popular culture, keeps its discourse alive and continually re-creates its Author, through the dynamic re-positioning of the agencies of the person, the writer, and the implied author.

"Lolita" and "nymphet" have entered the language, with the latter achieving dubious commercial, and lately Internet, sexploitation (Cornwell 71). Though presumably far from the intentions of Nabokov, their current status functions as part of their meaning



universe, and will ultimately effect, if perhaps only marginally, how the book and its author are perceived.

A climate of acute anxiety over child abuse developed from the 1980s, and persists still, throughout the western world (Cornwell 70). *Lolita*'s continued success in dividing critics may likely be attributed in part to such a climate, as can be said of the photography of Sally Mann. In a 1992 interview, Mann professes her longstanding affection for the books of Nabokov: "I just reread *Lolita*, [...] I love [Nabokov], of course. But I found it pretty difficult to read the second time because of what [Humbert] did to that girl" (Woodward 14). A photograph entitled "The New Mothers" (1989) shows Mann's daughter Virginia, born in 1985, wearing what Woodward refers to as "Lolita glasses" (Woodward 9). In most of the photographs, the children are posing with defiance and something akin to, or mimicking, sultry or sexually loaded gazes. "I don't think of my children, and I don't think anyone else should think of them, with any sexual thoughts," holds Mann, adding: "I think childhood sexuality is an oxymoron" (Woodward 13). However, as Woodward observes, "the extraordinary care taken in rendering the flesh, including the attention paid to incipient sexual characteristics", invites obsessive, rather than casual or clinical, examinations of the children's nakedness (Woodward 13). "The collaboration of the children in their mother's work is apparent to anyone who spends time in their company," observes Woodward, and goes on to characterize the children as "impish, argumentative participants, not robots" (Woodward 4). Woodward's observations, together with Mann's statements, imply that the children's poses, apparently mimicking adult sexuality, are their own, and not staged by their mother.

Humbert describes the appearance of Lolita in their first meeting as "peering at me over dark glasses" (Nabokov 1997:39), although the characteristic heart-shaped frames first appears in promotional posters for Kubrick's film adaptation (Ferguson, para. 9). According to Charlotte, Lolita also uses her mother's lipstick (Nabokov 1997:63-64). Much like Mann's children, Lolita appears to be mimicking the adult world. Humbert does, after all, describe her as "an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow close-ups" (Nabokov 1997:49).

Humbert claims that it was Lolita that seduced him (Nabokov 1997:133) and that she was not a virgin (Nabokov 1997:135) are not necessarily untrue, but with Humbert narrating, of course, their truthfulness are called into question.

On the Sunday a week prior to the davenport scene, with Lolita half sitting on his lap, Humbert perceives, "perhaps [...] through some slight change in the rhythm of her

respiration”, that Lolita, “with curiosity and composure”, is waiting for him to kiss her (Nabokov 1997:48-49). However, due to interruption by Louise, the maid, the kiss is aborted (Nabokov 1997:49).

Charlotte at one point describes her daughter as “very persevering” (Nabokov 1997:51), a quality that is certainly on display in Humbert’s description of Humbert and Lolita’s first kiss:

“Why do you think I have ceased caring for you, Lo?”

“Well, you haven’t kissed me yet, have you?”

[...]

Hardly had the car come to a standstill than Lolita positively flowed into my arms. [...] not daring really kiss her, I touched her hot, opening lips with the utmost piety, tiny sips, nothing salacious; but she with an impatient wiggle, pressed her mouth to mine so hard that I felt her big front teeth and shared in the peppermint taste of her saliva. [...] I knew, of course, it was but an innocent game on her part, a bit of back-fisch foolery in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance. (Nabokov 1997:112-13)

Mann’s “The New Mothers” plays into the discourse of *Lolita* by suggesting that children, through mimicry and curiosity, might well (appear to) act as the aggressor in the seduction of a paedophile.

“You mean,” she persisted, now kneeling above me, “you never did it when you were a kid?”

“Never,” I answered quite truthfully.

“Okay,” said Lolita, “here is where we start.” (Nabokov 1997:133)

In his defence, argues Humbert, he “was not even her first lover” (Nabokov 1997:135). At camp, she and her friend Barbara were “doing it by turns” with Charlie Holmes, the thirteen-year-old son of the camp mistress (Nabokov 1997:137). Whether or not the adult should be allowed to respond to such advances, of course, is an ethical question. Busack describes “the special shame of incest victims” as stemming from an element of participation; that they “sometimes might have enjoyed it a little – which is why they turn the guilt upon themselves afterward” (Busack, para. 18). Nabokov, Busack argues, understood that it is “not the sex itself, not the robbery of some sort of vague innocence” that is at stake, but rather the misuse of power (Busack, para. 19).

Describing his advances towards Lolita recorded in the diary, Humbert holds that he “knew exactly what to do, and how to do it, without impinging on a child’s chastity” (Nabokov 1997:55). Following the davenport scene, Humbert feels that he has done Lolita

“absolutely no harm”, having “stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor” (Nabokov 1997:62).

In a review of Lyne’s 1997 film adaptation of *Lolita*, Linda Holt reflects: “We sexualize the representation of children while demonizing those who respond sexually to them” (Cornwell 71). Following a screening of the film, Irons suggested that some victims of paedophilia go on to live perfectly happy lives, adding: “I’m not saying it’s right but we shouldn’t whip ourselves too much” (Yates, para. 8). Irons is described as an actor who refused to be type-cast as “the upper-class English gent”, instead opting for roles reflecting “something inside me dirtier, rougher, odder, uglier”, causing Yates to dub him “The Defender of Passion” (Yates, para. 13). Initially, Jeremy Irons had turned down the part of Humbert, but after Lyne accused him of being “politically correct”, Irons reconsidered (Yates, para. 6). Irons’ attitudes play into one of the defining characteristics of postmodernism: scepticism in the face of fixed ideas of truth, morality and reason (Shaw 155).

However, the novel does voice concern about Lolita’s psychological development, whether an effect of paedophilia, kidnapping, threats, or all of the above. In Beardsley, Lolita’s report card is poor (Nabokov 1997:193), despite an intelligence quotient of 121 (Nabokov 1997:107), teachers and schoolmates find her “antagonistic, dissatisfied, cagey” (Nabokov 1997:196), and her headmaster summons Humbert to inform him that “the onset of sexual maturing seems to give her trouble” (Nabokov 1997:193).

As shown in the above, voices outside the text, including Mann and Irons, continually play into and shape the discourse of *Lolita*. Even so, as Durantaye remarks, “the question of the book’s immorality or morality, its ethical message or the absence thereof, remains as uncertain and contested as it was at the time of the book’s publication” (Durantaye 60).

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In the problem statement, my first research question reads: *to what degree does Nabokov and Humbert Humbert become one in the telling of Lolita?* It is the first of four questions aimed at getting to the core of what I consider to be the foremost ethical concerns that the novel raises.

Nabokov has explicitly stated in interviews that he sees the novel as an attempt to believably portray passions that are foreign to his own emotional life. Nabokov also

describes Humbert as cruel. While the cruelty in question does not necessarily correlate to paedophilia as such, the characterisation suggests that Nabokov does not regard Humbert as his fully realised alter ego. However, Nabokov's statements about his intentions only reflect the attitudes he plays out in his author role, and does not constitute access to the "real" author at the time of writing. The reason that I choose to go beyond the text is that our perception of the implied author, who resides in the text only, is formed not merely by the text, but also by our perception of the person and the writer. When we learn something about one of these three agencies, our perception of the other two is shifted. Consequently, we can say that the three agencies are recreating each other as long as *Lolita* the discourse is alive, i.e. that there are statements made about *Lolita*.

The biography of Humbert appears to resemble closely that of Nabokov, including background, education, and itinerary. Hunting butterflies was one of the big passions of the biographical Nabokov, and is reflected, though not fully realised, in Humbert's nymphet myth. Arguably, butterflies are symbolically indicative of the full-blown women, rather than pre- to early teen girls. Another of Nabokov's big passions, writing, *is* fully realised in Humbert. Alas, what we know about the biographical Nabokov falls into line with the statements of the writer. He may, however, have been more subdued and seduced by his own exercise than he has cared to admit.

As far as we know, there is nothing in Humbert's biography that would suggest paedophile tendencies, although Nabokov the career author, the author's other implied authors, has extensively handled variations on the theme of ill-fated love between a very young girl and an older man, certainly attesting to more than a passing interest in the subject matter.

When the style and manner of a text's narrators reflect, as in *Lolita*'s case, the wit and intelligence of the writer and the career author, it suggests an affinity between the implied author and his subject matter, whether fully realised or merely an exercise in empathy. Besides manner and style, the implied author is perceived through allusions to other texts, of which there is a wealth in *Lolita*. I have traced Lewis Carroll and the *Alice* books as substantial presences in *Lolita*. The sheer variety of connections certainly attests to Nabokov's respect for Carroll's work, but also indicates a degree of empathy with, or at least an attempt to understand, Carroll's apparent paedophile tendencies.

Interdiscourse, in particular the persistent anxiety over child abuse throughout the western world, along with intertextual reverberations, such as Mann's photography,

continue to dynamically recreate *Lolita* the discourse, in turn playing into our perception of the Nabokov-Humbert relationship.

Finally, what is the significance of the apparent lack of coherence between the acts of the biographical Nabokov, whose irreproachable history does not provide any indication of paedophile tendencies, Nabokov the writer, whose statements are often vague or ambiguous, yet largely falls into line with our perception of the person, and the implied author, whose allusions point to undeniable respect for, and fascination with, the assumed paedophile Lewis Carroll, without whom there might have been no Humbert at all? As the illustration of the discursive construct of the author (see fig. 1, p. 12) demonstrates, the degree of overlapping correlates to the degree of accordance between the three agencies. A level of discord between the agencies will correspond with a level of ambiguity with regards to what we perceive as the author's intentions. Arguably, the ambiguity fails to prescribe the reader's moral reaction, in turn forcing him or her to navigate the novel using his or her own moral compass.

## HUMBERT HUMBERT

*Lolita* is a novel pretending to be a memoir with a foreword. The text is full of reproduced or simulated texts, from letters, fragments of a diary, and a class list, to road signs and excerpts from motel registers. Like countless detective and horror stories, the book presents itself as a textual game (Wood 103).

Asked once about whether his characters ever "took hold" of him, Nabokov replied: "I have never experienced this [...] I am the perfect dictator in that private world, insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth" (Bader 63). Always aiming for total control, Nabokov would only do scripted interviews, claiming, absurdly, that his command of English was not strong enough to speak off the cuff; he admitted to having "rewritten – often several times – every word I have ever published"; his wife stopped him at least twice from burning drafts of *Lolita*, and, realizing that he would not live to finish it, he left instructions that the unfinished manuscript for *Laura* should be destroyed (Anderson 1).<sup>11</sup> Book critic Sam Anderson poignantly describes the effects of Nabokov's "authorial fascism": "Nabokov's wildest lyrical flights all had to be filtered through the

---

<sup>11</sup> However, neither his wife nor his son could bring themselves to do it, and the unfinished novel was eventually published, in 2009 (Anderson, para. 4).

part of the brain that liked to design chess puzzles. As a result, even his best work can leave a slightly unsettling residue: the paradoxical feeling of crazy invention fussily controlled” (Anderson 1). We can determine from the above, then, that any metalepsis or apparent discrepancy we might uncover in the text will be intended;<sup>12</sup> orchestrated by Nabokov the implied author.

The foreword is ascribed to John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., whose flaunted doctorate makes clear that he is a figure of fun. He is a self-admiring psychologist insisting on the “ethical impact” of Humbert’s memoir; what Nabokov endlessly denied that he was seeking (Wood 106-07). Read as a posthumous manuscript from jail, the extent of Ray’s editing is uncertain (Cornwell 64). Ray is, he tells us, a “friend and relation” of Humbert’s lawyer, which is how he comes to be editing the manuscript (Nabokov 1997:3). As such, he is a character, albeit minor, in the story he tells. The echoing initials J. R., Jr. suggest a connection to the protagonist, whether Nabokov’s invention or Humbert’s intervention. At times, Humbert seems to have infiltrated its stodgy style with his taste for alliteration and French phrases, with a lyricism alien to Ray’s flat-footed thought (Wood 108). The mention of a Vivien Darkbloom (Nabokov 1997:4), an acronym for Vladimir Nabokov, on the other hand, points to the explicit, as opposed to implied, presence of the author in the text. Through the double metalepsis (see fig. 2, p. 41), the implied author strongly signals the fictionality of the foreword. If John Ray is the protagonist’s invention, then, accordingly, the entire novel is the work of Humbert, who would not have “died in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis, on November 16, 1952” (Nabokov 1997:3), as claimed in Ray’s foreword (Cornwell 66).

Clancy shows how John Ray’s foreword, along with Humbert constantly pointing out the unnaturalness of his feelings, anticipates an orthodox moral reaction from the reader; a “presumptuous taking over of his own prerogatives” (Clancy 105), that the reader might be tempted to resist rather than submit to. Sometimes, in brackets, Humbert will address his lawyer, regretting the loss of records of his exact itinerary (Nabokov 1997:154), or advising him not to correct a slip of his pen (Nabokov 1997:32). At one point, in what appears to be a flair for the dramatic, masqueraded as despair, he tells the printer to repeat the name “Lolita” until the page is full (Nabokov 1997:109). The digressions, as intended by Humbert, covers up the deceptive structure of his novel, by adding to its feeling of authenticity as a memoir.

---

<sup>12</sup> with the possible exception of a Russian propensity for nicknames

Mary Elizabeth Preston has developed a terminology for identifying the relationship between the narrator and the act of narration; a narrator with an *authorial disposition* is aware of himself as a storyteller; a *self-conscious* narrator is, in addition to having an authorial disposition, aware of his agency in creating the effects of his narration (Phelan 103). Humbert, intent on deceiving the reader through the fabrication of a diegetic level, as I will show, clearly embodies the latter.

As Humbert describes the action largely from his perspective as character, the reader sees the events through the filter of Humbert's attitudes; his pride in his cleverness, his eager anticipation of success, and his ultimate satisfaction (Phelan 105). "To read the scene", argues Phelan, "is to take on Humbert's perspective, and to take on his perspective means to see his perverse desire from the inside" (Phelan 105-6). According to Dolinin, it is not the protagonist's erotic reverie as such that is criminal, but his desire to impose it on the outside world (Cornwell 66).

I agree with Durantaye's assertion that Humbert's merciless self-parody is central to his persuasiveness (Durantaye 85):

If you find his story unbelievable, his complaints mawkish, his reasoning faulty, he is protected from this criticism by the sword of irony and shield of parody. If you find his story credible, his complaints compelling, his reasoning sound, then the parody becomes something else: the sign of his suffering. Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of a pain so great it can only be spoken of in a mocking tone used to protect the teller. Humbert calls upon this phenomenon. (Durantaye 85)

Humbert's frequent use of allusion plays into the literary sensitivities and education of his reader, argues Durantaye, noting: "We all know the experience of finding value and interest in a phrase because it contains an allusion we think only a select group will recognize" (Durantaye 85-86).

In the third chapter of *Living To Tell About It* (2005), "Dual Focalization, Discourse as Story, and Ethics", James Phelan considers the relationship between technique and ethics in the narrative of *Lolita* (Phelan 98). Phelan, in order to differentiate his own perspective from that of Humbert, refers to Lolita by her given name, Dolores (Phelan 99). Similarly, I believe that Nabokov signals perspective through the protagonist's use of diminutive forms of Dolores at different stages of the novel.

The dual perspective of Humbert the narrator and Humbert the character importantly does not restrict the perspective to that of Humbert at the time of the action (Phelan 107). Through the use of dual focalization, argues Phelan, Humbert's act of telling

becomes part of the represented action; “a present-tense story running parallel to the past-tense story of Humbert and Dolores” (Phelan 121). Humbert the narrator reports what Humbert the character experiences, but also what Humbert the narrator retrospectively thinks of these experiences (Phelan 113). In chapter 3 of part two of *Lolita*, Humbert the narrator reflects:

And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep. (Nabokov 1997:175-76)

Exactly where does focalization on Humbert the character enter the sentence? Phelan points to a temporal ambiguity in the phrase “in retrospect”, which can refer either to a retrospect from Humbert the character’s present, or to Humbert the narrator “thinking today” (Phelan 118). Towards the end of the sentence, we enter dual focalization; Humbert the narrator envisions Lolita sobbing “every night, every night”, while at the same time perceiving Humbert the character’s awareness of that sobbing (Phelan 118). The dual focalization involves, according to Phelan, an implied story about the ethical struggle of Humbert the narrator (Phelan 119, 121). According to Phelan, the act of telling is by the end of part one of *Lolita* leading Humbert to start facing much of what he has previously turned away from, and the motive for his telling shifts (Phelan 120-21). However, as I will argue, the apparent shift may be just that; Humbert giving all appearance of experiencing a moral awakening, when in fact he is not. Although there is an apparent shift in sentiment in Humbert’s narration from part one to part two of *Lolita*, there are, in my opinion, a number of hints within the text that, in sum, point to limited genuine change in Humbert’s motive for telling the story. Humbert is, I will argue, not so much “reperceiving himself” (Phelan 120) as faking emotionality, or appearing touching, as Nabokov describes Humbert in the Paris Review interview.

The narratological hierarchy in *Lolita* reaches from John Ray, Jr., on the extradiegetic level, through Humbert, on the intradiegetic level, down to Charlotte Haze, in her letter to Humbert, on the metadiegetic level, as the following figure illustrates:



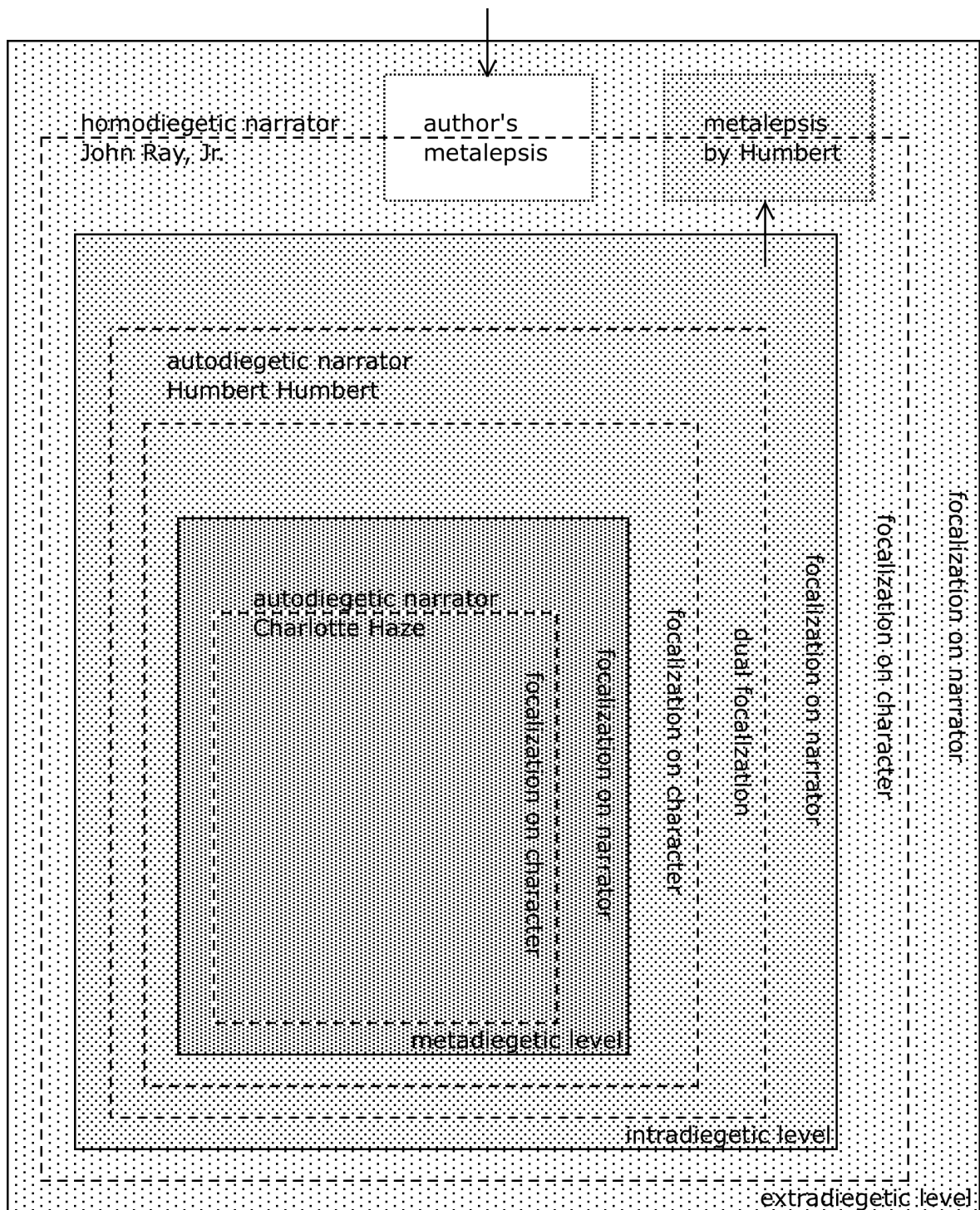


Fig. 2: *Lolita's* narratological hierarchy, running from the outermost level, which exhibits the highest level of narrative control, down to the innermost level, which exhibits the lowest level of narrative control. Each shade of grey constitutes a diegetic level.

Within each diegetic level, I consider focalization on narrator to constitute the higher level of reflection, as it carries the strongest imprint of the narrator. Dual focalization, where the narrator is channelling, and is in a sense dependent on, the character's reflections, occupies the middle level, whereas focalization on character, where the narrator does not reflect independently, constitutes the lower level of reflection.

Entries in *Who's who in the Limelight*, transcribed by Humbert (Nabokov 1997:31-32), a mimeographed class list (Nabokov 1997:51-52), Charlotte's love letter to Humbert (Nabokov 1997:67-68), Lolita's short letter to "Mummy and Hummy" from camp (Nabokov 1997:81), fragments of the three letters written by Charlotte on the day of her death (Nabokov 1997:99), a Beardsley newspaper's "Column for Teens" (Nabokov 1997:185), a letter to Lolita from Mona Dahl, a friend from Beardsley (Nabokov 1997:222-23), a mimeographed sheet of acting exercises (Nabokov 1997:230), the Enchanted Hunters hotel's notepaper heading (Nabokov 1997:261), and Lolita's final letter to Humbert (Nabokov 1997:266), all constitute narrating instances on the metadiegetic level. However, Charlotte's love letter exhibits greater structural complexity than the rest, with focalization on both character and narrator, as Charlotte the character's actions and thoughts are interjected with Charlotte the narrator's reflections:

Last Sunday in church – bad you, who refused to come to see our beautiful new windows! – only last Sunday, my dear one, when I asked the Lord what to do about it, I was told to act as I am acting now. You see, there is no alternative. I have loved you from the minute I saw you. I am a passionate and lonely woman and you are the love of my life. (Nabokov 1997:67)

On account that Charlotte's letter occupies a diegetic level that is subordinate to, or imbedded in, Humbert's narration (see fig 2, p. xx), it is at the mercy of Humbert's editing and/or invention.

Although Humbert gives us every reason to distrust the text, we end up weirdly trusting it, according to Wood, perhaps because Humbert frequently tells us when his afterthoughts may have clouded his recollection of events (Wood 104). This odd oscillation between trust and distrust is particularly tangible in Humbert's re-imagination of Charlotte Haze's impassioned letter to her lodger: "[...] Let me rave and ramble on for a teeny while more, my dearest, since I know this letter has been by now torn by you, and it's pieces (illegible) in the vortex of the toilet. [...]" (Nabokov 1997:68). Having presenting us with the letter, Humbert then comments:

What I present here is what I remember of the letter, and what I remember of the letter I remember verbatim (including that awful French). [...] There is just a chance that “the vortex of the toilet” (where the letter did go) is my own matter-of-fact contribution. She probably begged me to make a special fire to consume it. (Nabokov 1997:68-69)

After evidently relishing in the cruel, yet humorous descriptions of Charlotte for some thirty-five pages, Humbert claims to have insulted “poor Charlotte for the sake of retrospective verisimilitude” only (Nabokov 1997:71): “It is with a great effort of will that in this memoir I have managed to tune my style to the tone of the journal that I kept when Mrs. Haze was to me but an obstacle” (Nabokov 1997:71).

The descriptions of the love affair between Humbert and Annabel, “assimilating every particle of each other’s soul and flesh” (Nabokov 1997:12), echoes their adult counterparts in romance novels. It is reason to question whether the affair may not simply be Humbert’s invention, or modification, to “normalize” his relationship with Lolita in the reader’s mind. It also allows Humbert to be sexually explicit about sexual activity involving a child without crossing moral boundaries, pre-empting some of the reader’s reaction to upcoming events. Without Annabel, insists Humbert, “there might have been no Lolita at all” (Nabokov 1997:9). Humbert describes them as twin souls, with co-occurring dreams and experiences long predating their love affair (Nabokov 1997:14). Humbert goes on to claim that Annabel was reincarnated in Lolita (Nabokov 1997:15), but there is no indication that Humbert ever shows much interest in Lolita’s mind, or attempts to assimilate his and Lolita’s soul. As Wood suggests, we can accept the proposition that Annabel prefigures Lolita without being much persuaded by Humbert’s assertion that the interruption of his affair with Annabel caused his fixation on little girls (Wood 119).

Humbert claims to remember his diary, destroyed five years prior to writing the memoir, “as if it was really before me [...] by courtesy of photographic memory” (Nabokov 1997:40), having first written, and then copied it in its entirety (Nabokov 1997:40). He compares his present account to the way in which “a spy delivers by heart the contents of the note he swallowed” (Nabokov 1997:41). However, the sheer volume of reproduced pages (Nabokov 1997:41-55) decreases the reliability of Humbert’s claim.

Humbert’s narration clearly exhibits underreporting, misreporting, and misregarding (Phelan 108), and Phelan deems Humbert largely oblivious to the effects of his bending of the truth, e.g. in the narration of Humbert’s marriage to Valeria, which makes her look “like a long-suffering saint and him like a cruel egoist” (Phelan 107).

Arguably, though, unreliability is inherent to all narration, and when, as in Humbert's narrative, it is made explicit, the apparent candour makes the text oddly more reliable.

"This book is about Lolita" (Nabokov 1997:253), Humbert states some three-quarters into the text, but the emphasis, Wood feels, and I tend to agree, invites us to quarrel (Wood 115). Rather, it is about "the obsessive dream of Lolita which captured the actual child and took her away" (Wood 115). Without glimpses of the substantial American child, though, there would be, as Wood argues, "no novel here that matters, only the brilliant, vain spinning of a mind hooked on nothing but its own figments" (Wood 115). The Lolita we see, through Humbert's memory is, in fact, "an entirely ordinary child, unbearable, lovable, funny, moody" (Wood 116). At one point, Lolita even appears to have picked up her stepfather's habit of alliteration, or so Humbert would have us believe (Wood 112): "Oh, a squashed squirrel," she said. "What a shame" (Nabokov 1997:140). There is always the possibility, of course, that she said nothing of the kind, much like "the vortex of the toilet" in Charlotte Haze's letter.

In chapter 13 of part one of *Lolita*, a section known as the davenport scene (Phelan 104), Humbert brings himself to orgasm without Lolita's knowledge (Nabokov 1997:57-61). As the selfishness displayed by Humbert the character is not likely to inspire the "impartial sympathy" (Nabokov 1997:57) prescribed by Humbert the narrator, Phelan deems Humbert's aesthetic control to be "not entirely successful" (Phelan 105). However, here, as in his article as a whole, I feel that Phelan is underestimating Humbert the narrator, and consequently ends up oversimplifying Nabokov's project.

Durantaye notes that the use of an unreliable narrator who discloses or transmits information to the reader without him- or herself being aware of its import is one of Nabokov's most successful devices (Durantaye 49). In the case of *Lolita*, though, my sense is that Humbert is more in control than Durantaye and Phelan suggest.

The davenport scene ends on a run-on sentence reminiscent of Molly Bloom's soliloquy:

The day before she had collided with the heavy chest in the hall and – "Look, look!" – I gasped – "look what you've done, what you've done to yourself, ah, look"; for there was, I swear, a yellowish-violet bruise on her lovely nymphet thigh which my huge hairy hand massaged and slowly enveloped – and because of her very perfunctory underthings, there seemed to be nothing to prevent my muscular thumb from reaching the hot hollow of her groin – just as you might tickle and caress a giggling child – just that – and: "Oh, it's nothing at all," she cried with a sudden shrill note in her voice, and she wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back, and her teeth rested on her glistening underlip as she half-turned away, and my moaning mouth, gentlemen of the

jury, almost reached her bare neck, while I crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known. (Nabokov 1997:60-61)

Humbert fetishizes the immorality of his relationship with Lolita, insisting that “with an incestuous thrill”, he had grown to regard her as his child (Nabokov 1997:80). Now, if Humbert the narrator’s main objective was, as Phelan suggests, to justify his actions in the eyes of the readers, then surely he would not let Humbert the character act out male sexual fantasies<sup>13</sup>, only to close the scene by implicitly asking the readers to decide if he is “man or monster”. The “huge hairy hand” massaging Lolita’s thigh would point the readers to the latter, an effect likely orchestrated rather than miscalculated by Humbert the narrator. Accordingly, I believe Phelan’s selective separation of purpose between Humbert the narrator and the implied Nabokov to be, at least to some degree, misguided and unsubstantiated. While Humbert the narrator “started out self-absorbed and focused on his own defence, he ends up far more concerned about Dolores than himself”, insists Phelan (Phelan 129). Phelan goes on to declare that “the story of Humbert’s gradual move toward greater clear-sightedness is a move to greater reliability along the axis of evaluation, and it indicates a greater respect for his audience” (Phelan 129). However, It seems to me that Phelan’s assertion is based on the flawed logic that a story that is ethically sound must necessarily also be reliable, whereas a story that is ethically questionable must necessarily be unreliable.

In being both his own accuser and apologist, Humbert unites roles that are traditionally polarized in American novels (Clancy 110). According to Phelan, defenders of the book will generally point to “the shift in purpose of Humbert’s narration – from exonerating to condemning himself” (Phelan 102), whereas its detractors will attribute the same apparent shift in purpose to Humbert trying to manipulate the audience into sympathizing with him, arguing that his confession is just another way of objectifying Lolita and that his transformation is very limited, redeeming neither himself nor the novel (Phelan 102). Phelan here seems to make the flawed assumption that defending a book must necessarily entail the approval of an ethically sound primary narrator.

In an oft-quoted passage (Phelan 125) from the last chapter of part two of *Lolita*, Humbert, stranded on a hill and awaiting his arrest, having been intercepted by two vehicles, hears the voices of children playing:

---

<sup>13</sup> I could, arguably, have modified the phrase by adding “exaggerated” or “perverted”, but then sexual fantasies often are just that.

I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord. (Nabokov 1997:308)

The passage indicates, as Phelan observes, that Humbert even before he began his narration had begun to admit that he had robbed Dolores of her childhood (Phelan 126). Then, as character turned narrator, Humbert apparently reverts to relishing in objectifying Lolita for much of the narration, which makes little sense unless the alleged epiphany is not genuine. Leona Toker agrees, arguing that a genuine moral apotheosis would have interfered with Humbert's retrospective narrative, in particular with respect to his presentation of paedophilia as incomparable bliss (Durantaye 93).

#### THE DISCREPANCY READING

An apparent discrepancy between the number of days in which Humbert wrote the text, and the number of days that could have passed according to the narrative, leads some critics to suspect that the action proper ceases on September 22, 1952, the day he receives a letter from Lolita, now Mrs Richard F. Schiller (Cornwell 65-66). In fact, immediately before recounting the receipt of the letter, Humbert reflects on "the race between my fancy and nature's reality" (Nabokov 1997:264). The discrepancy reading, accounted for below, relegate the visit to Dolly Schiller, as well as the murder of Quilty, to the realm of fantasy, making the role and reality of Quilty speculative (Cornwell 66).

In the foreword, penned by John Ray, Jr., we find that Humbert Humbert died on November 16, 1952 (Nabokov 1997:3), whereas Mrs Richard F. Schiller, which we later will learn is Lolita's married name, died on Christmas day, 1952, along with her stillborn child (Nabokov 1997:4). Ray describes 1947 as "the fatal summer" (Nabokov 1997:5). The foreword is signed August 5, 1955 (Nabokov 1997:6). In my illustration of the story timeline, immediately followed by a detailed review of its backing in the text, the fields hatched in light grey represent the dates that are introduced, and exclusively referred to, in the foreword:

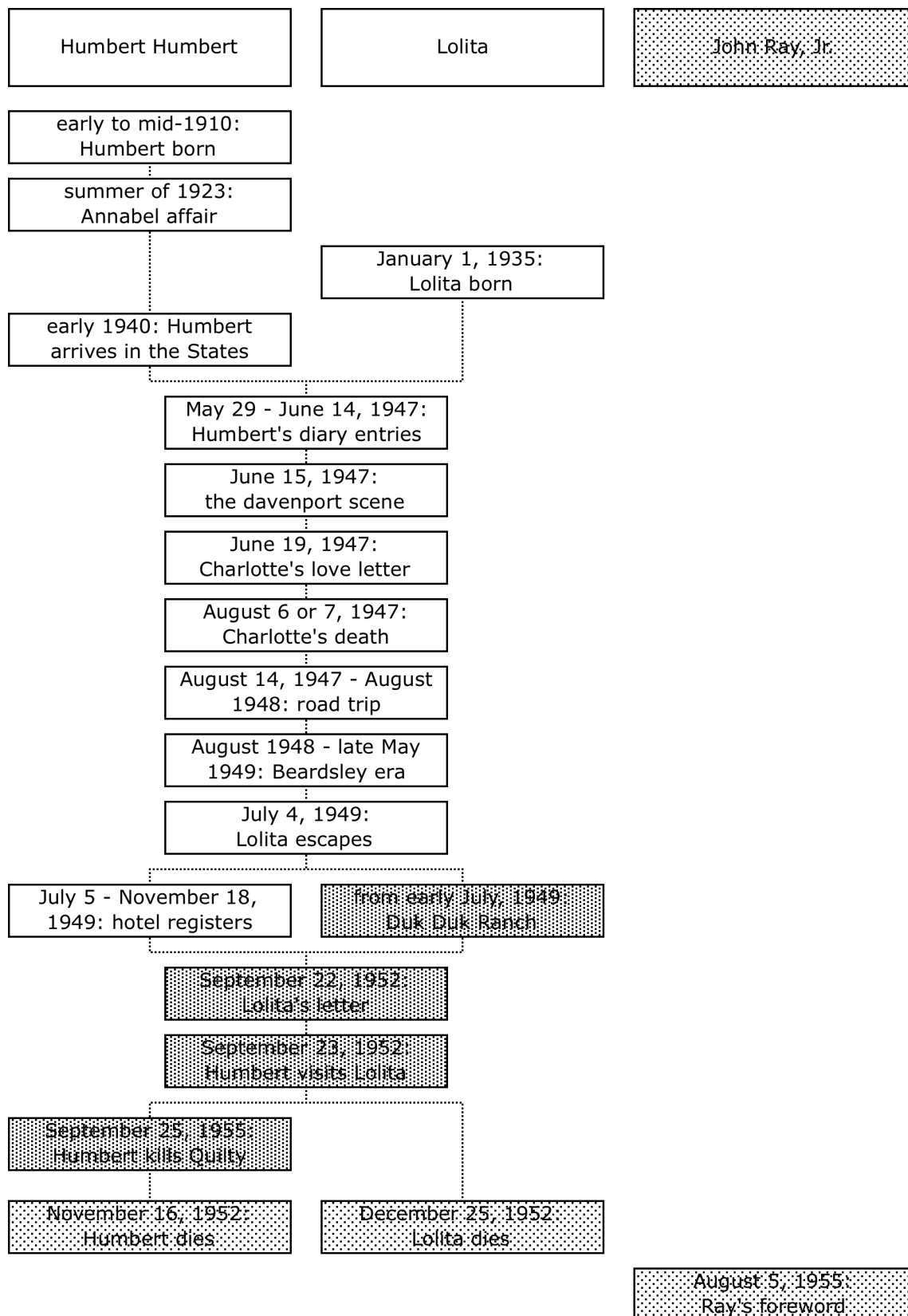


Fig. 3: story timeline, sorted by character.

Humbert Humbert was born in 1910 (Nabokov 1997:9). One summer, “about as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer” (Nabokov 1997:9), and after his thirteenth birthday (Nabokov 1997:11), he met Annabel, a few months his junior. Four months later, Annabel dies of Typhus in Corfu (Nabokov 1997:13). Twenty-four years later, Humbert asserts, “I broke her spell by incarnating her in another” (Nabokov 1997:15). At the time of writing the memoir, in September 1952, twenty-nine years have passed (Nabokov 1997:18). A comment about morals, in which Humbert regrets that society “allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve”, suggests that Annabel’s age might have been twelve that summer. From hinting at the year of the Annabel affair with a riddle, Humbert gradually gives more substantial clues, until no other answer than 1923 remains. It follows that Humbert’s birthdate is early to mid-1910.

In the summer of 1939, Humbert’s uncle dies, leaving Humbert with an annual income, provided that he move to the States (Nabokov 1997:27), where he arrives the following year (Nabokov 1997:32).

A few days before May 30, 1947, Humbert moves into the Haze house in Ramsdale (Nabokov 1997:40). From memory alone (Nabokov 1997:40), Humbert reproduces diary entries for seventeen consecutive days (Nabokov 1997:41-55), starting with a Thursday (Nabokov 1997:41). The final reproduced diary entry is a Saturday (Nabokov 1997:54), and “the davenport scene” occurs on the following day (Nabokov 1997:57). The following Thursday, Humbert receives Charlotte’s love letter (Nabokov 1997:67), and he accepts her proposal. At the end of July, on a Tuesday morning, Humbert shares a last swim with Charlotte at Hourglass Lake (Nabokov 1997:81-82). A look at that year’s calendar provides us with the date of the swim as July 29, 1947 (“1947 Calendar”). A week<sup>14</sup> (Nabokov 1997:93) and a day later (Nabokov 1997:94), Charlotte is killed (Nabokov 1997:97). Adding eight days to July 29, 1947, lands us on August 6, 1947 as Charlotte’s date of death. Earlier, Humbert refers to his and Charlotte’s “fifty days of cohabitation” (Nabokov 1997:77). The calendar then provides us with the date of Charlotte’s love letter, assuming that their “cohabitation” started the same night, as June 19, 1947 (“1947 Calendar”). Fifty days from this date, however, is not August 6, but August 7, 1947. It follows that either “fifty days” is an approximation, or the remembered week after the last bath was in fact six days. Charlotte’s death, then, occurred on either August 6 or August 7,

---

<sup>14</sup> “I think it was exactly a week after our last swim [...]” (Nabokov 1997:93)



1947. We can now also pin down the date of the davenport scene to June 15, 1947, and the diary entries to May 29 through June 14, 1947.

On a Wednesday (Nabokov 1997:103) at least four or five days after Charlotte's death (Nabokov 1997:99), Humbert leaves Ramsdale behind, having rented a room in the Haze house "only ten weeks before" (Nabokov 1997:103). The 1947 calendar shows it must have been closer to eleven weeks ("1947 Calendar"), but as with the "fifty days of cohabitation", "ten weeks" could be merely an approximation. Pausing before his account of the following day, a Thursday, Humbert believes that this "must have been around August 15, 1947" (Nabokov 1997:109). The calendar tells us that the next day, when he collects Lolita from summer camp, and their road trip together starts, must in fact be August 14, 1947 ("1947 Calendar"). The very next morning, in the Enchanted Hunters hotel, they have intercourse for the first time (Nabokov 1997:132-35).

Lolita's age, hinted at with the Annabel affair, is made explicit in the diary, with Humbert referring to his "twelve-year-old flame" (Nabokov 1997:45). Later, his statements that she will be thirteen on January 1 (Nabokov 1997:65), and that she was just "a little curved fish" within a white stomach in 1934 (Nabokov 1997:76), pins Lolita's date of birth down to January 1, 1935.

Humbert and Lolita's yearlong road trip (Nabokov 1997:151) ends in August 1948, in Beardsley (Nabokov 1997:154). A Sunday morning (Nabokov 1997:208), following a Friday night towards the end of May (Nabokov 1997:202), they go back on the road (Nabokov 1997:208). The calendar holds that their date of departure must be May 22 or 29, 1949 ("1949 Calendar"). One day in Elphinstone, Humbert, in a feverish state, registers the sound of "firecrackers, veritable bombs" exploding, and he concludes that there must be "some great national celebration in town" (Nabokov 1997:245). The next morning, Humbert learns that Lolita has left the hospital the previous day, with "her uncle, Mr. Gustave" (Nabokov 1997:246). Later, Humbert recollects how they reached Elphinstone "about a week before Independence day" (Nabokov 1997:247), and the alert reader should then deduce that Lolita escaped, poignantly, on Independence day, 1949.

From July 5 to November 18, 1949, Humbert seeks up the places where he and Lolita have stayed, checking their registers for clues as to the true identity and whereabouts of "Mr. Gustave" (Nabokov 1997:248). On September 22, 1952, Humbert receives a letter from Lolita, dated September 18, 1952 (Nabokov 1997:267). He visits the now pregnant Lolita the next day, and she tells him that it was the playwright Clare Quilty that collected her that day in Elphinstone, taking her to his Duk Duk Ranch, from which she was soon

kicked out (Nabokov 1997:268-77). In the course of the following two days, Humbert tracks down, confronts, and kills Quilty (Nabokov 1997:282-304). Shortly after, Humbert's car is cut off, and he awaits his imminent apprehension (Nabokov 1997:306-7).

In one of the final paragraphs of the memoir, Humbert states that he started writing his memoir "fifty-six days ago [...] first in the psychiatric ward for observation" (Nabokov 1997:308). However, even allowing for Humbert to have written this passage and finished the book on the very day that he died; going back fifty-six days from November 16, 1952 takes us as far back as September 21, 1949, the day before Humbert receives Lolita's letter, effectively relegating Lolita's letter, Humbert visiting Lolita, and the confrontation with Quilty to the realm of fantasy. In my illustration of the story timeline (see fig. 3, p. 47), the discrepant dates, along with one referred to only by the pregnant Lolita of the final meeting, are represented by the fields hatched in dark grey.

Ross Wetzsteon notes that "caress the details" and "the divine details" were among Nabokov's favoured phrases while lecturing on literature at Cornell (Rowe 61). Nabokov's Russian translation of *Lolita*, published in 1967, though inserting certain chronological minutiae, retained the important discrepancy (Cornwell 67).

Surely, it is unlikely that John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., in his concise, thorough introduction would get Humbert's date of death wrong. We are then left with the minimum of "fifty-six days" that must have passed between Humbert's arrest and his death. As I have shown in the summary above, the chronology of events, when traced from clues and occasional specific dates, are remarkably faithful to the calendar years in question. Even when Humbert makes an approximation, he is never far off. Fifty-six days is hardly an approximation, and it presents itself in the rather lucid, seemingly well-deliberated final sequences of the memoir. The disparity, in other words, must be intentional. Accordingly, when Humbert at one point feels the need to remind the reader of his "appearance much as a professional novelist" (Nabokov 1997:104), the remark hints at the possibility that he in fact *is*, and that John Ray, Jr. is his invention. The immediate consequence is that the fields hatched in either shade of grey in my illustration of the story timeline (see fig. 3, p. 47) are relegated to the realm of fantasy.

Would not John Ray, or Humbert's lawyer, have known the date of Humbert's arrest, and reacted accordingly upon noticing that the receipt of Dolores' letter does not predate the arrest? Does it not appear true to Humbert's spirit to want to be found out, and therefore provide us with the clues himself? Do not the final sequences of the book, painting Humbert as a hero, ring untrue to what precedes them? It is perhaps not unlikely

that his love object and adversary would conveniently die or be killed of once, as in the cases of Annabel and Charlotte, the former seemingly unable to live without him and the latter as revenge for spiting him.<sup>15</sup> Is it likely that the same thing would happen again, though, or are the deaths of Lolita and Quilty more likely products of Humbert's fancy?

Humbert describes Quilty as a "semi-animated, subhuman trickster who has sodomized my darling" (Nabokov 1997:295); a more fitting description of Humbert himself, with his French phrases, and flair for the dramatic. Among the people present in Quilty's home following the shooting are two "pale young beauties" on a davenport (Nabokov 1997:304), recalling the davenport scene in part one of *Lolita*. Humbert's first encounter with his doppelganger occurs outside the Enchanted Hunters hotel, where he appears as a voice in the darkness (Nabokov 1997:126). Bader describes Quilty as "amorphously present" in Ramsdale, speaking in the dark of The Enchanted Hunters Inn, and appearing as "a series of shadowy figures" trailing Humbert in rented cars (Bader 70). As Bader holds, "we cannot ascertain whether Quilty is actually following their car, or whether the 'clues' of the hotel registers were really diabolically planted by Quilty" (Bader 75). Humbert's repeated stays at sanatoriums or psychiatric wards, twice following his arrival in the United States (Nabokov 1997:33), once after Lolita's escape, and, finally, following his arrest (Nabokov 1997:38), should be taken into account when considering the reality of Humbert being followed. At one point, Humbert himself offers: "[...] it was becoming abundantly clear that all those identical detectives in prismatically changing cars were figments of my persecution mania [...]" (Nabokov 1997:238). His "persecution mania", along with a sense that everyone is plotting against him (Nabokov 1997:243), or constructing insults for his eyes only, as perceived in hotel registers (Nabokov 1997:248, 250), are all typical symptoms of paranoia (Fenigstein 84). Humbert's double, Hyde comments, is "the man who is really guilty (or Quilty)" (Hyde 116); the manifestation of Humbert's guilt.

Film reviewer Richard von Busack has the following take on the novel's conclusion: "The heroine is destroyed by the so-called happy ending (by finding a nice, unthreatening man and settling down); the antihero dies in jail" (Busack, para. 10). This is, of course, what Humbert *wants* us to think. It is Humbert's ideal ending.

---

<sup>15</sup> In addition, Valeria, his first wife, who left him for another, died in childbirth in 1945 (Nabokov 1997:26-30), and Charlie Holmes, who had intercourse with Lolita at camp (Nabokov 1997:137), died in Korea (Nabokov 1997:290).

While relating his last meeting with Lolita, Humbert insists that he loved the real Lolita:

[...] I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine [...] even if those eyes of hers would fade to myopic fish, and her nipples swell and crack, and her lovely young velvety delicate delta be tainted and torn – even then I would go mad with tenderness at the mere sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous young voice, my Lolita. (Nabokov 1997:278)

The repulsion Humbert has relentlessly displayed towards Valeria and Charlotte; in fact, towards any female that can no longer be considered a nymphet, should make us question not only the reliability of his claim, but the reality of their last meeting. In addition, their final good-byes read like the scripted ending of a romantic movie, suggesting that the scene is a product of Humbert's fancy:

“One last word,” I said in my horrible careful English, “are you quite, quite sure that - well, not tomorrow, of course, and not after tomorrow, but - well - some day, any day, you will not come to live with me? I will create a brand new God and thank him with piercing cries, if you give me that microscopic hope” (to that effect).

“No,” she said smiling, “no.”

“It would have made all the difference,” said Humbert Humbert. (Nabokov 1997:280)

When Humbert is able to retain his feelings for Lolita, who is describes as his “aging mistress” already during the Beardsley era (Nabokov 1997:190), it is likely on account that, as with Annabel, he never encounters her again after she enters womanhood.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In the problem statement, my second research question reads: *how does the narrative structure of Lolita affect the reliability of its main protagonist Humbert Humbert?* It is the second of four questions devised to address what I consider to be the foremost ethical concerns that the novel raises.

*Lolita's* narrative hierarchy runs from the extradiegetic level of John Ray's foreword, through the intradiegetic level of Humbert's memoir, down to the metadiegetic level of Charlotte's letter. The hierarchy is central to reliability, as the higher levels function as both editors and guarantors of the texts situated at the lower levels. The risk for the embedded level narrators is that their output may be heavily edited or altered by the

embedding level narrators. As for rewards, the embedding level narrators serve as guarantors for the authenticity of the embedded texts. In *Lolita*, Humbert's reliability is decisively strengthened by the presence of the foreword, as Ray's editing appears to be minimal. Charlotte's letter, on the other hand, suffers from Humbert's heavy-handed editing and reimagining, aimed at strengthening the reliability of Humbert's characterization of her.

Dual focalization serves at least two important purposes in *Lolita*. First, when Humbert tells us that his afterthoughts may have clouded his re-imagining of events, he paradoxically strengthens his reliability by confessing to his tendency to underreport, misreport, or misregard, as the audience will recognize the inclination as human rather than calculating. Second, the implied second story about the ethical struggle of Humbert, as the act of telling confronts him with the severity of his actions, adds a level of reflection that strengthens his reliability.

The discrepancy reading, which effectively reshuffles the novel's hierarchy, damages Humbert's reliability on all narrative levels. In the new configuration, John Ray is Humbert in disguise, and the foreword and memoir are on the same, extradiegetic level, whereas Charlotte's letter occupies the intradiegetic level. Without the reality of John Ray as the guarantor for the authenticity of Humbert's narrative, Humbert's reliability is weakened. In addition, where Humbert's narration describes events that are now relegated to fantasy, a narrative conflation occurs, and we are left with focalization on narrator only. When narrative deception is pinpointed, suspicion levelled at the narrator inevitably increases. Similarly, where Charlotte's letter is concerned, Humbert's reliability suffers, with the degree of editing or rewriting coming under increased scrutiny.

Ultimately, it is the prerogative of the narrator occupying the higher diegetic level to promote or undermine the reliability of the narrator residing at the lower levels. Judging by the discrepancy reading, Humbert's strategy is to inflate his reliability by passing himself off as being at the mercy of editing, when in fact he is in total control.

### CHAPTER THREE: LOLITA AND THE LITERARY SUBLIME

In the afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov recalls “the initial shiver of inspiration” for *Lolita* as “somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage” (Nabokov 1997:311). Extensive research has failed to unearth the article or the experiments it refers to, leading Durantaye and others to assume that it is, most likely, Nabokov’s own mischievous invention (Durantaye 184).

Whether fictive or not, the story makes the point that our individual sense of reality is governed by perspective. As I have shown in the previous chapter, *Lolita* is told predominantly from the perspective of Humbert, and is orchestrated by Nabokov as an exercise in empathy. In the first part of the chapter, I will analyse the novel’s apparent sublimation of paedophilia, the effect of which is to seduce the reader into emphatically taking on the perspective of the predator. In the second part of the chapter, I will discuss the particularities of literature as a vessel for the sublime, using examples from film and painting to further my analysis of the sublime in *Lolita*.

#### LOLITA

Maurice Couturier objects to those who “have tried to prove the celestial level of [Nabokov’s] moral standards”, arguing that this approach “is accompanied by a somewhat suspect erasure of everything in Nabokov’s work that arises from pleasure or transgression” (qtd. in Durantaye 17). Nowhere is this clearer than in *Lolita*’s manifestations of the sublime.

Humbert emphasizes the element of unnaturalness in his feelings, never quite making his mind up whether to be proud or ashamed of his differentness from other men (Clancy 105). His claims that his feelings are superior in kind and intensity to those of the common man, though, clearly trumps his admissions of the unnaturalness of his feelings,

as he frequently juxtapositions his feelings of magical enchantment against the sphere of banality that other people inhabit (Clancy 106).

The Nabokovian lover relishes the twofold nature of reality, in which the vulgarly obvious and everyday object has a profundity and fineness available to him alone. [...] The material for the imagination may lie in the physical world. But the product of the imagination is transformed into a passionately emotional object, which then lives independent of any conventional reality. (Bader 60-61)

The passage recalls Boileau, who describes a sublime that can only be recognized by the gifted few; those who possess a certain “je ne sais quoi” (Shaw 12-13).

Rowe notes how Nabokov “utilizes inanimate objects, backgrounds, and events to reflect his characters’ mental and emotional states” (Rowe 78), such as the “breathless garden” where Humbert first encounters Lolita (Nabokov 1997:40), the “surprised and pleased closet-door mirror” in room 342 of *The Enchanted Hunters* (Nabokov 1997:119), or their “puzzled house” as Humbert and Lolita abruptly leave Beardsley (Nabokov 1997:208). Baille describes how physical objects can become sublime through the use of analogy and figurative language (Shaw 44, 47). The above examples of personification grant an aura of the fantastic to the space in which Lolita moves.

Busack observes that Kubrick’s *Lolita* includes a number of film noir devices, such as “lots of road trips, double identity, a man with a gun, danger in the form of a beautiful (little) woman” (Busack, para. 15). Nabokov’s *Lolita*, of course, does too. The cumulative effect of these elements is similar to that described in the previous paragraph.

In the first chapters of the second half of the novel, the geography of the United States, where consumerism is making its mark, is set in motion through the descriptions of Humbert and Lolita’s endless tour of motels (Clancy 108). Fredric Jameson hails *Lolita* for its treatment of consumerism and popular culture of post-war America between 1947 and 1952, dubbing it “the Great American Novel” (Cornwell 63). As Hyde remarks, *Lolita* contains elements of a Europe/America antithesis; history versus geography, “culture” versus “community” (Hyde 116, 118). Clancy seems to put Humbert’s observation that the initials of the American Refrigeration Transit Co. spell ART (Nabokov 1997:157), largely down to brilliantly satirical detail (Clancy 109). In addition, the observation constitutes an instance of the social fantastic, a term denoting a mysterious dimension of modern society perceived through the juxtapositioning of the archaic and the modern, or the human and the inanimate (Phillips 101-2). Similarly, while Lolita is using a roadside restroom, Humbert surveys his surroundings:

[...] while lost in an artist's dream, I would stare at the honest brightness of the gasoline paraphernalia against the splendid green of oaks, or at a distant hill scrambling out - scarred but still untamed - from the wilderness of agriculture that was trying to swallow it. (Nabokov 1997:153)

Again, Humbert sees art, and his description of the scene opens for the reader “a window into the realm of another aspect of the everyday” (Philips 101-2).

Humbert describes nymphets as having a true, fantastic nature of which they are themselves unconscious, that is non-human, demoniac, recognized only by “an artist and a madman” (Nabokov 1997:16-17). Not all “girl-children” are nymphets, and good looks are not a criterion, nor is vulgarity necessarily an impairment (Nabokov 1997:17). Besides Boileau, for whom recognition of the sublime is reserved for the gifted, the description also recalls Reynolds, who describes the sublime as marking the limits of human perception, where reason gives way to madness (Shaw 46).

Towards the end of part one of *Lolita*, Humbert's narration returns to the nature of nymphet love:

I am trying to describe these things not to relive them in my present boundless misery, but to sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world - nymphet love. The beastly and beautiful merged at one point, and it is that borderline I would like to fix, and I feel I fail to do so utterly. (Nabokov 1997:135)

Phelan cites the emphasis on “the portion of hell” and “the beastly” in support of a new willingness in Humbert to admit to the horror of his behaviour (Phelan 121). However, the emphasis in the above quote is neither on hell and the beastly, nor on heaven and beauty, but rather on the effect of their juxtaposition. For Kant, the sublime, alternating between attraction and repulsion, appears to frustrate judgement (Shaw 72, 78-79), an aspect that immediately raises ethical concerns (Shaw 14, 26). Humbert's expressed endeavour to “fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (Nabokov 1997:134) supports my position that this and the related attempt to fix the borderline between the hell and the beastly signal an ambition of rhetoric, rather than a willingness to repent.

The ambition of Humbert's careful description of the nymphet, Wood suggests, may hold insights to less crazily specialized affections, too, as romantic love is itself crazily specialized: “Every loved being has a second, secret, demonic nature which arbitrarily and categorically separates him or her from people who seem and perhaps really



are very similar” (Wood 122). The “loved being” resonates with Lacan’s concept of the Imaginary: Lolita the beloved object is an illusion, a response to Humbert the lover’s longing for wholeness. Humbert’s expressed endeavour to “fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (Nabokov 1997:134) merges, according to Wood, with the endeavour to secure the shared immortality of literature for Lolita and himself, the two endeavours coming together in “the myth he has invented for his obsession” (Wood 121-22). Bader likens Humbert’s effort to preserve Lolita in his own image to “the predicament of the artist, trying to capture his subject in the act of motion but succeeding only in divesting it of its vitality” (Bader 68). Yet, Bader notes, “there remains a tantalizing part of Lolita which is resistant to the process of artistic abstraction, which constantly threatens to grow up and engulf the nymphet part” (Bader 69). Lolita the sublime object is, as Burke, drawing on Burke, describes, “always on the brink of conversion into customary beauty” (Shaw 60); of leaving her nymphet phase behind by literally growing into a woman.

Lolita’s rather sporadic interest in Humbert appears to cause him minimal heartache:

[...] and I realized as I hung up that a couple of hours at that camp had been sufficient to blot out with new impressions the image of handsome Humbert Humbert from little Lolita’s mind. But what did it matter now? I would get her back as soon as a decent amount of time after the wedding had elapsed. (Nabokov 1997:72)

The above passage reveals that for Humbert mutual love does not appear to be of foremost importance. A passage referring to the davenport scene provides further insights:

What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita - perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness - indeed, no life of her own. (Nabokov 1997:62)

“I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever”, Humbert professes, only to add in the same paragraph: “The word ‘forever’ referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood”- (Nabokov 1997:65). What Humbert desires is, to employ Lacan’s theory of the Imaginary, Lolita’s incorporation into his symbolic universe. This, of course, can only be achieved by securing their shared immortality in literature.

Humbert’s speech upon leaving Lolita for the last time will necessarily divide critics, Clancy comments, with those appreciating the novel’s truthfulness to life and its wit, elegance and lyricism finding the passage to be “one of the most poignant moments in

twentieth-century fiction” (Clancy 114): “[...] and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else” (Nabokov 1997:277). Clancy hails *Lolita* as one of the most humane novels written in English in the 20th century, for “ugly and repellent though the events are with which it deals, Nabokov makes of them a triumphant assertion of a human love, [...] ending inevitably in the destruction of the lovers” (Clancy 102). However, based on a discrepancy reading of *Lolita*, and factoring in the bile Humbert inevitably directs at any female that can no longer be considered a nymphet, there is little doubt that the substantial Lolita, almost 18 and pregnant, would have been reduced from object to abject.

Their final exchange concludes: “‘Good by-aye!’ she chanted, my American sweet immortal dead love; for she is dead and immortal if you are reading this” (Nabokov 1997:280). Lolita is, by the time of the telling, dead in a literal sense, as, in the conclusion of the memoir, Humbert requests that his memoir be published “only when Lolita is no longer alive” (Nabokov 1997:309). She is immortalized, on the other hand, by inscription into Humbert’s memoir: “I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (Nabokov 1997:309). The immortal love, then, is that of Humbert and Lolita, the impossible object, attainable only in death.

It is John Ray, Jr., possibly Humbert’s own creation, who holds that development of the story is “tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis” (Nabokov 1997:5). I understand the statement to imply that the moral apotheosis is one that is supposedly arrived at by Humbert the narrator. It is, however, difficult to see that Humbert ever sees the real Lolita, or that he sees a crime beyond rape and kidnapping.

Humbert’s crime, according to Wood, is to lock a child out of her own history, by taking her away from her time and her place (Wood 116). Humbert describes Charlotte as a cold mother (Nabokov 1997:76), and, upon learning that she has nothing positive to say about Lolita in a survey called “Your Child’s Personality”, concludes that Charlotte “simply hated her daughter” (Nabokov 1997:80-81). Though Lolita’s removal from her mother may be conceived as healthy in some respects, the alternative she is presented with is clearly worse. Humbert pays Lolita her weekly allowance “under condition she fulfils her basic obligations” (Nabokov 1997:183), effectively turning her into his own private prostitute. In addition, he instils in Lolita a sense of shared guilt, as the wayward child who

would be analysed and institutionalized if ever she decided to report him to the police (Nabokov 1997:151).

The final passage of part one of *Lolita*, ironically set in “the gay town of Lepingville”, anticipates the more sombre tone of part two: “At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go” (Nabokov 1997:142). Increasingly, a lack of purpose weighs heavy on Lolita (Nabokov 1997:151), until, probably anticipating her own escape, she matter-of-factly articulates her predicament from her hospital bed in Elphinstone:

“My Carmen,” I said (I used to call her that sometimes), “we shall leave this raw sore town as soon as you get out of bed.”

“Incidentally, I want all my clothes,” said the gitanilla, humping up her knees and turning to another page.

“. . . Because, really,” I continued, “there is no point in staying here.”

“There is no point in staying anywhere,” said Lolita. (Nabokov 1997:244)

If, as I have proposed, the action proper ceases on September 21, 1952, the day before Humbert claims to have received a letter from Lolita, then the passage represents the substantial Lolita’s final appearance in the novel. In addition, the discrepancy reading stipulates that John Ray is the protagonist’s invention, and that Humbert maintains the novel’s deceptive narrative hierarchy. The novel, like Neudrecker’s dioramas, promise transcendence, yet, after caressing the details, as Nabokov proposes, its structure is exposed, and the illusion is shattered.

In a 1958 interview on *Close Up*, CBS, Nabokov holds, referring to *Lolita*: “I don’t wish to touch hearts, and I don’t even want to affect minds very much. What I want to produce is really that little sob in the spine of the artist-reader” (*Close Up*). In *Lectures on Literature* (1980), Nabokov stipulates that the ideal reader should read “not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine”, for “it is there that occurs the telltale tingle”; “a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual” (qtd. in Durantaye 58). In *Strong Opinions* (1973) Nabokov holds that “the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel” (qtd. in Durantaye 58). The short story “A Forgotten Poet” refers to “that heavenly draft which suddenly locates the sensorial effect of true poetry right between one’s shoulder blades” (qtd. in Durantaye 59). For Humbert, recognizing the magic of the nymphet requires a similar aesthetic responsiveness

(Durantaye 59); “a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine” (Nabokov 1997:17).

The spine is the literal core of the body, and my sense is that the prescribed sensual and intellectual pleasure must necessarily involve some degree of affirmation of the self. *Lolita* exposes human love as sublime deceit; a response to the lover’s longing for wholeness with the beloved object that must ultimately end in the destruction of the lovers. Recognizing the futility of love’s ambition, the artist reader might experience something amounting to “that little sob in the spine” that Nabokov aspires to produce.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In the problem statement, my third research question reads: *what are the ethical implications of apparent manifestations of the sublime in Lolita?* It is the third of four questions addressing what I consider to be the foremost ethical concerns that the novel raises.

The nymphet myth, the various ways in which Humbert generates and maintains the Lolita of his obsession, constitutes the novel’s central manifestation of the sublime, to which most other such manifestations, whether conjured from inanimate objects or setting, relate. Its most significant effect is to seduce the reader into emphatically taking on the perspective of the paedophile predator. The nymphet myth plays into the reader’s vanity, by presenting nymphet love as exclusive, recognized only by the artistically or intellectually gifted.

Applied to Lacan’s theory of the Imaginary, Lolita the nymphet is the beloved object, incorporated into Humbert’s subjective universe. Humbert shows little interest in Lolita’s mind, the essence of the substantial girl. As Lolita the nymphet is disconnected from reality, she can only be attained outside of it, in the shared immortality of literature.

The discrepancy reading exposes Humbert’s declaration of love for the substantial, pregnant Lolita as fantasy. Humbert’s consistently malignant characterization of girls and women who have moved beyond the nymphet stage suggests that the substantial, pregnant Lolita would in fact have been reduced from object to abject.

The manifestations of the sublime in *Lolita* seduce the reader into emphatically taking on the perspective of the paedophile predator. Humbert’s perpetuation of the nymphet myth appears to be a deliberate strategy that falls neatly into a pattern of deceit suggested by the apparently deceptive narrative hierarchy. Simultaneously, though,

Humbert appears to be a victim of his own deception, as he pursues to the edge of the abyss the impossible object of his passion.

## THE LITERARY SUBLIME

Literature's centrality as a storytelling medium has been increasingly challenged by other art forms, from painting and music, through photography and film, to more recent amalgams of the above, such as multimedia projects and art installations. In what ways may its reworking into other art forms limit or enrich the scope of literature? Or, more specifically pertaining to this thesis: what, if any, aspects of *Lolita* the novel's treatment of the sublime cannot easily or effectively be transferred to other art forms?

I will first briefly look at the film adaptations of *Lolita* by Kubrick and Lyne, before handling specific examples from the films of Leni Riefenstahl and Gus Van Sant, and the art of Bjarne Melgaard, that I consider particularly useful when addressing the final research question.

## KUBRICK'S AND LYNE'S LOLITAS

Following the New York opening of Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962), Nabokov would privately sum up the end product as "a lovely misty view seen through a mosquito netting" (qtd. in Cornwell 68). Although Nabokov received sole credit for the script, Kubrick would drastically rework it (Cornwell 68). In the preface to the screenplay, composed in 1960 and revised for publication in 1973, Nabokov insists that Kubrick used "only odds and ends of my script" (qtd. in Schuman 195).

In the novel, Humbert the narrator's hilariously malignant and ever-present humour facilitates a sense of complicity between the reader and the protagonist that is largely lost in Kubrick's adaptation. In the movie, the characters are merely mirroring their characterization by the novel's character-narrator, effectively voiding the novel's central theme of the unreliable narrator. Schuman argues that the shift from a Humbert-narrated text to one with no narrator, save for the sporadic voiceover narration, causes us to have less interest in, and a diminished respect for, Humbert's intelligence, wit, and imagination (Schuman 201).

As Cornwell notes, "any cinematic adaptation of a novel is forced to make interpretive choices and usually a straight realist reading will be suggested" (Cornwell 69).

The Kubrick movie eliminates the novel's hide-and-seek game regarding the identity of Clare Quilty (Schuman 200). Unlike in the novel, where Quilty is lurking in the shadows, he is in plain view throughout the movie. Arguably, though, Peter Sellers' over-the-top performance as Quilty, and the mysterious air of his sometimes accomplice Vivien Darkbloom could lead some to question the reality of either. Sellers' exaggerated Dr. Zempf, a poorly disguised Quilty, could be perceived as Humbert's paranoid mind playing tricks on him. As Stam notes, the circular structure of Kubrick's *Lolita* "draws attention away from Humbert Humbert's nympholepsy and toward the murderous rivalry between Humbert and Quilty" (Stam 73).

At the time of shooting, Sue Lyon, who played Kubrick's Lolita, was 15, which, together with the restriction of sexuality largely to whisper and innuendo, effectively transforms Humbert's fixation into an obsession rather than a perversion (Cornwell 69). With Quilty more visible and Lolita less innocent, the character of Humbert, too, is altered; his persecution is greater and his crime is less (Schuman 201).

Cornwell argues that Adrian Lyne's 1997 film adaptation lacks the style, wit, and tone achieved by Kubrick. Set half a century before its production, Lyne's *Lolita* has acquired the nostalgic feel of a period drama, and the overall romantic tone of the film is at odds with the novel. In an interview with *Vogue*, Jeremy Irons offers his perspective on the film, in which he plays Humbert: "In the popular imagination, Lolita is this stupendous little kitten, [...] and in the film we certainly paint her so. But in the book she's absolutely ghastly-cheap, not pretty, bad teeth, bad skin, smelly – that's the drama, that he's besotted by this awful girl" (qtd. in Wurtzel, para. 8). Humbert is attracted to Lolita's slangy speech and harsh, high voice (Nabokov 1997:41-42), and though he remarks that "she should wash her hair once in a while" (Nabokov 1997:43), this, too, adds to her "eerie vulgarity" (Nabokov 1997:44), which he compares to that of "very young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels" (Nabokov 1997:44). According to Lance Olsen, *Lolita* can be read as a reworking and perversion of the Pygmalion myth (Cornwell 64), something that is lost in both film adaptations.

A novelist's portrayal of a character induces the reader to imagine the character's features in his or her mind (Stam 55). When reading *Lolita*, Humbert's narration conjures two Lolitas; Lolita the beloved object, and the substantial girl. Similarly, Humbert's projection of Charlotte differs from the substantial woman that the reader glimpses through Lolita's inconsolability upon learning of her death, or trace between the lines of Charlotte's letter. Both film adaptations, forced to make interpretive choices, presents

Charlotte as a comical, pathetic figure, whereas Lolita is sultry and seductive. As such, the films do not take to task the disparity between Humbert's perceptions and reality that is, in my view, essential to the novel. The severity of Humbert's crimes is made less, e.g. by eliminating his intention to drug Lolita, so that the audience may retain a degree of empathy with Humbert, sustained in the novel through Humbert's deceptive narration. The davenport scene, in which Humbert, Schuman holds, "wishes to create his own mental Lolita and have sexual relations with this created image" (Schuman 202), a rare opportunity to embody Lacan's theory of the Imaginary, is eliminated entirely in both movies.

In Lyne's *Lolita*, Quilty is reduced to a sinister presence in the background (Cornwell 71). Quilty shadowy existence for the most part of the film, along with the nightmarish melodrama of the execution scene, retains the novel's sense of Quilty as Humbert's doppelganger and dark self. The scene, though, is at odds with the realism of Humbert's final visit with Lolita, where Lolita inexplicably, given Quilty's thoroughly repulsive appearance and demeanour in the execution scene, professes that Quilty is the only man she ever really cared for. It would seem, then, that Lyne, like Kubrick, essentially opts for a realist reading of the novel.

The film adaptations fail to transform Lolita's appearance from that of a child, in earlier scenes, to adult for her final scene, thus voiding the question that the novel should raise in the reader's mind of whether Humbert the paedophile would conceivably pursue the adult Lolita, as he purports to do in their purported final meeting.

Although Kubrick's and Lyne's film adaptations of *Lolita* make for pleasant enough viewing, they fail to capture the tone of the novel, or account for the severity of Humbert's crimes. More importantly, though, the sense of deception that is incapsuled in the narrative structure of the novel is lost altogether. In the following, I will look to films by Leni Riefenstahl and Gus Van Sant, and paintings by Bjarne Melgaard, to explore ways in which these central aspects of Nabokov's novel may be more successfully transposed to other disciplines of the arts.

### *TRIUMPH OF THE WILL*

Mary Devereaux, in her essay "Beauty and evil: the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*", holds that Riefenstahl's documentary of the 1934 Nuremberg rally of the National Socialist Workers' Party is one of the most controversial films ever made

(Devereaux 227). Artistically a success, it won the Gold medal at the 1935 Venice Film Festival, as well as the Grand Prix at the 1937 Paris Film Festival (Devereaux 230). In terms of both controversy and artistic merit, then, the film could be seen as on a par with Nabokov's *Lolita*.

Riefenstahl made the film at the personal request of Hitler, who not only orchestrated the rally, but also helped with the film's preproduction planning, and gave the film its title, *Triumph des Willens* (Devereaux 228). When Riefenstahl agreed to make the film, it was on the condition that she be given complete artistic control, including final cut (Devereaux 238). Hitler did not see the film in advance, nor did any of the Nazi officials (Devereaux 229), indicating a certain artistic freedom on the part of Riefenstahl, and, as Devereaux suggests, affirming Hitler's "complete faith in Riefenstahl's political 'soundness'" (Devereaux 253). Though some of the officials thought it "too artistic", Hitler was apparently delighted with the film (Devereaux 229).

The film appears to stand in a causal chain of events leading up to the Holocaust (Devereaux 236). However, some historians argue that the film was little seen and not widely used by the Nazis (Devereaux 253). Even so, the acclaim it received, on both the national and international stage, attests to a certain notoriety. The reality the film records, argues Devereaux, is one that it helped to create, by giving "form to Hitler's vision of Germany's future" (Devereaux 239). Riefenstahl, arguing that her concerns were merely aesthetic, not political, denies that *Triumph of the Will* is a work of propaganda (Devereaux 237). She maintains that the film was "pure documentary", in the sense that it merely recorded the truth of a particular time and place in history (Devereaux 237).

The pure-aestheticism defence is refuted by the historical record (Devereaux 237). Riefenstahl was, by her own account, a great admirer of Hitler, finding herself fascinated and deeply affected by his appearance while attending her first political rally in 1932 (Devereaux 237). At the end of the war, she claims to have harboured doubts about his plans for Germany, yet she cried all night upon the news of his death, and never distanced herself from the political content of the film (Devereaux 237). Arguably, Riefenstahl's affinity with the subject matter of Nazism is as much in question as Nabokov's affinity with the subject matter of paedophilia.

Documentaries, of course, are never simply transcriptions of events, as they will always be, to some degree, edited and constructed (Devereaux 239). When Devereaux argues that *Triumph of the Will* is propaganda, it is because its organization seems to be governed by political aims (Devereaux 239). The 1934 rally was, holds Devereaux, not



simply unfolding, but constructed to be the subject of the film, supported by Riefenstahl's own acknowledgement that the rally was prepared "in concert with the preparations for the camera work" (qtd. in Devereaux 239). To provide her often stationary subjects with action and motion, Riefenstahl had rails and tracks laid, and lifts installed, throughout the rally site, even instructing the crew to practice roller skating (Devereaux 228). The film's scenes were rehearsed beforehand (Devereaux 228), further bringing into question the film's credentials as a documentary. In the film's second night rally scene, fireworks are edited to explode in time with the soundtrack of a marching band (*Triumph of the Will*). Finally, Riefenstahl ignored chronological order, instead working to create a dramatic, rhythmic succession of highlights and retreats (Devereaux 230).

The film's symbolism, with the swastika, the German eagle, and flags combined with powerful aural and visual motives, such as towering architecture, torches, the roaring crowds, and Hitler's voice, works to establish the three key Nazi ideas of a united people ("Ein Volk."), a powerful German empire ("Ein Reich."), and a strong leader ("Ein Führer."), who Devereaux dubs "the bearer of the people's will" (Devereaux 231-32). *Triumph of the Will* promotes a sense of the sublime, primarily in the strength and imminence perceived through its build-up and momentum, but also through instances of the social fantastic; the contrasting of the old, misty city with the industrial-like organization of civilian and military parades, in a divine vision of Hitler's new Germany merging with, and replacing the old Germany. Kubrick and Lyne would have done well to follow Riefenstahl's lead in this respect, and in the following, I will attempt to suggest how.

The film starts off with a black screen, from which a low angle shot of a monument of the Nazi insignia, a modified version of the eagle of the German coat of arms ("The federal eagle", para. 14), fades in from black, on a background of sky with moving clouds (*Triumph of the Will*). This is immediately followed by titles and a prologue setting the scene:

On 5 September 1934

20 years after the outbreak of the World War

16 years after the beginning of German suffering

19 months after the beginning of the German rebirth

Adolf Hitler flew again to Nuremberg to review the columns of his faithful followers (*Triumph of the Will*)

Already with the prologue comes a sense of imminence; of the coming of a saviour. Soft violins are playing in the soundtrack as the camera catches waves of clouds, bringing a sense of the beyond; a totality of bliss and harmony. In one shot, from the perspective with the plane, the shadow of the plane is gliding over the rooftops, resembling very closely the eagle of the Nazi insignia. A similar effect could have been achieved in the film adaptations of *Lolita* by promoting a sense of the sublime in scenes where Lolita is the centre of attention. In the scene of the “breathless garden” in which Humbert and Lolita’s first encounter takes place (Nabokov 1997:40), *Lolita* could have been filmed from behind or in between trees or bushes, providing Lolita with a setting akin to that of a butterfly. Waves of leaves blowing in a light breeze, along with an evocative soundtrack could have provided an air of the unreal; of Lolita the beloved object.

A prolonged sequence following Hitler’s cortege as it drives from the plane to a central Nurnberg hotel follows, mostly from the perspective with, rather than of, Hitler, with shots from behind his shoulders intercut with shots of the crowds (*Triumph of the Will*). A panning shot that focuses on a fountain portraying a man holding geese is particularly effective, as Hitler may be perceived as magically breathing life into it (*Triumph of the Will*). In what I consider to be instances of the social fantastic, other statues, monuments and buildings are filmed to similar effect along the route, as if they were part of the crowd. The first scene of the next morning starts with views of the waking city, set to harmonious, soft orchestral music. In one of the first shots, filmed from inside a room, a window is opening, seemingly by itself, onto the view of Nurnberg, continuing the magical sense of a city coming alive through the arrival of Hitler; Nazi flags are waving, there are flowers in the windows, and chimneys are smoking. From the river, while floating under a bridge, the camera catches the reflection of the river on the ceiling of the bridge (*Triumph of the Will*). In the following shot, a building’s reflection in the river fills the frame (*Triumph of the Will*). As a whole, the sequence creates the sensual illusion of the elements of the city merging into one living, breathing organism. Through Hitler’s arrival, the old city, with everyone and everything in it, is being reborn. Using Riefenstahl’s technique, Kubrick or Lyne could have given life to the “surprised and pleased closet-door mirror” (Nabokov 1997:119) in *Lolita*; capturing the closet-door in movement, being opened, yet appearing to open on its own accord, as Lolita comes into view in its mirror.

In a night rally scene, waves of moving Nazi flags dominate the frame, as the men carrying them are consumed by darkness. Often, Hitler’s presence in the dark parts of the

frame is only felt through his voice, while the viewer is drawn to insignias on top of flagpoles, glowing in the floodlight. In another shot, he is filmed sideways from afar between rows of dark silhouettes (*Triumph of the Will*); a presence in the crowd, yet removed from it, elevated to the mythical sphere of the glowing Nazi insignia. In the film adaptations of *Lolita*, filming the title character in between leaves in the garden scene might have achieved a similar effect, providing Lolita the object with a mythical aura.

A monument of the insignia, filmed from a low angle, with the eagle looming large as its spread wings consume the frame, fades into view, with drums rolling, as we enter the final day covered in the film (*Triumph of the Will*). Hitler, flanked by leading Nazi officials, attend a ceremony in commemoration of the recently deceased Reichspräsident and General Feldmarshall Paul von Hindenburg. Having paid their respects, Hitler and the officials turn to walk back through a large arena filled with immaculately organized troops. One prolonged take follow the three men, who initially fill the frame, directly from behind, following them by panning, rather than zooming, as they walk away from the camera (*Triumph of the Will*). The camera is raised faster than men can retain their position in the frame, causing them to gradually near its lower perimeter, the effect being something approaching the illusion of flight. In one shot, Hitler, on his platform, occupies one side of the frame, while a monument of the Nazi insignia, with its prominent German eagle perching on a Swastika, occupies the other, both filmed from a low angle with the sky in the background (*Triumph of the Will*). In scenes where Hitler's vantage point appears to be only slightly elevated from the street level, he is often filmed from a low angle. One shot in particular is filmed from a very low angle, with the partly clouded sky filling the entire background (*Triumph of the Will*). The effect is the illusion of Hitler looming over the crowd, godlike. The illusion of flight, akin to that of a butterfly, could have been achieved in either film adaptation of *Lolita*'s garden scene by having a moving camera filming Lolita in between leaves, all the while making sure to hide the ground from view. Alternatively, filming Lolita from a low angle against the sky, with the frame co-occupied by live creatures in flight, or representations of such, would have achieved a similar illusion.

The films longest parade sequence, with Hitler in attendance, is an exercise in building momentum. The parade consists of various groups of uniformed civilians and troops, all perfectly organized and coordinated in a seemingly unending stream through the streets. As the parade proceeds, the military quotient appears to increase, as does the number of marchers in the streets at any one time (*Triumph of the Will*). Devereaux

observes how the sequence, running nearly twenty minutes, and presenting the power of the Nazi empire as daunting and unquestionable, testifies to a nation “ready to go to war” (Devereaux 235-36). In retrospect, this may be true, but it was hardly evident at the time, seeing as the film was widely regarded as a masterpiece even beyond Germany’s borders.

The parade tracked from behind an old building, from an elevated position in the parade as it passes under a bridge, or reflected in the river (*Triumph of the Will*), magically turns the city itself into an active participant and spectator. The country appears to be united not only geographically, but physically, too.

Devereaux’s position is that the film’s “every detail is designed to advance a morally repugnant vision of Hitler, a vision that, as history was to prove, falsified the true character of Hitler and National Socialism” (Devereaux 241). However, what the film presents is a charismatic leader with a message capable of unifying the German people, qualities Hitler and the party indisputably possessed. Devereaux’s position seems self-defeating, as it fails to come to terms with the reality of a leader, most likely, and a party, certainly, who believed that they were serving the greater good of their nation and its people. Where *Lolita* is concerned, Kubrick and Lyne both fail to present the novel’s narrator, only scantily represented in voice-over narration in the film adaptations, as capable to convert the audience to believe in nymphet lore. Even with extensive use of voice-over narration, Humbert’s artistic gifts as a narrator would ultimately have been eclipsed by the represented truth, whether that of *Lolita* in her substance, or *Lolita* as the narrator paints her.

Julius Streider, in one of the film’s few indications of the Holocaust, holds: “A people that does not protect the purity of its race, will perish” (*Triumph of the Will*). At another point, Hitler, addressing the assembly of party faithfuls, following an account of the history of the National Socialist Party, asserts, with Julius Streider nodding in approval: “And because these are the racially best of the German nation, they can in the proudest self-esteem claim the leadership of the Reich and the people” (*Triumph of the Will*). The statement recalls the earlier quote by Streider, and together, they constitute the film’s only explicit references to the racial hygiene policies of Nazi Germany. However, there is an element of sublimation in the low-angle close-ups of consistently blonde boys and men, perfect examples of the Aryan ideal. As a younger official introduces Hitler, the camera pans along the playing field filled with orderly rows of young men. As he speaks of “Adolph Hitler, the leader of young men”, the scene intercuts between close-ups of Hitler’s face, as he reviews the ranks from afar, and extreme close-ups of focused-looking,

handsome, frequently blonde boys and young men (*Triumph of the Will*). The film adaptations of *Lolita* fail to indicate the pathology of Humbert's passion, a lack that could have been amended by a combination of having an actress who actually looked twelve play Lolita, and by showing Humbert eyeing other girl-children.

The main concern presented in Devereaux's essay is that pleasure in works of art that celebrates morally repugnant subject matter, such as Nazism, sadism, or paedophilia, "might lead one to ask not just about what one may *become*, but also what one is *now*" (Devereaux 242-43). My contention is that these are questions that should be asked. In confronting our reactions to a work of art, we are confronting not only its subject matter, but also simultaneously the devices that render the subject matter attractive. Although, as Devereaux holds, there is risk of being completely and irreparably seduced, I would argue that the potential rewards are greater.

Works of National Socialist propaganda cannot be legally shown in Germany (Devereaux 254), but as Devereaux asserts, "deciding not to ban (or avoid) materials like *Triumph of the Will* means learning not to deny, but to live with, the historical reality of the Third Reich" (Devereaux 251). I believe that recognizing the appeal of Nazism and nymphet love in *Triumph of the Will* and *Lolita*, respectively, involves a recognition that Riefenstahl's film and Nabokov's novel represent dangers that are both relevant and universal.

Devereaux holds that *Triumph of the will* is flawed as a work of art because it presents "as beautiful, attractive, and good what, on reflection, can be seen to be evil" (Devereaux 250). I disagree. Sublimation might well be more powerful and, ultimately, more effective than pure terror, as the sublime activates the faculty of judgement, whereas pure terror merely produces disassociation.

In the above, I have suggested how Kubrick and Lyne could have drawn from *Triumph of the Will*'s all-permeating sense of the sublime. Next, besides expanding on the devices available to invoke manifestations of the sublime, I will explore ways in which the directors could have more effectively incorporated aspects of *Lolita*'s narrative structure.

## *ELEPHANT*

Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) is, as *LA Weekly*'s Scott Foundas notes, a "thinly disguised re-creation of the Columbine high school shootings" of April 20, 1999 (Foundas 38). It received the prestigious Palme d'Or, along with the price for Best Director, at the

2003 Cannes Film Festival (Foundas 38). The film has sometimes been blamed for the Red Lake Massacre in 2005, as the killer reportedly watched *Elephant* a mere seventeen hours before the shooting took place (Richardson, para. 5).

The film's title refers to the parable of a group of blind men who each describes an elephant by touching one part of it (Scott, para. 7), and, as in *Lolita*, perspective plays a central role in the film. Scott describes "the steady trajectory of the camera tracking behind students as they navigate the schools corridors", positioning the viewer as a passive witness to the inexorable unfolding of events (Scott, para. 6). There is a looping narrative structure (Scott, para. 3), following one or a group of characters at a time, so that several perspectives are represented.

In the first recording of an exchange between a student, John, and a woman in the school's reception area, we can only make out her part, with Nathan, the student who is the focus of the shot, speaking over it. In the second recording of the same exchange, with John as the focus of the shot, we hear both John and the woman, while Nathan can be heard in the background only. Both visually and sonically, then, the overlapping represents two different perspectives.

Another student, Michelle, is tracked from behind down a hallway. We see Michelle passing two figures, blurred, as if to approximate her reduced vision from behind thick prescription glasses. Michelle passes the boys and hurries into the library, where the camera falls back and everything comes into focus. Applied to the literary term focalization, with the camera representing the heterodiegetic narrator, the blurred shot approximates internal focalization, with the camera taking on Michelle's perspective, whereas the expanded shot approximates external focalization, with the narrator removed from the characters' inner workings.

In one of the film's longest shots, a mounted camera tracks behind Nathan across the campus to the edge of the playing field, where it suddenly halts and remains stationary until he reaches the building, as if a person who has been following him stops, bringing self-consciousness to the viewer's experience (Scott, para. 42). The shot approximates internal focalization while the camera tracks Nathan; then switches to external focalization as the camera halts.

In a film adaptation of *Lolita*, adding voice-over narration to stationary, wide-angle shots should approximate focalization on Humbert the narrator, whereas tracking shots that take on some aspects of Humbert the character's sensual experience should approximate dual focalization. Focalization on Humbert the character could be represented by hand-

held point of view shots, also known as subjective camera, where the camera represents the character's gaze, perceptually or conceptually (Engelstad 108).

The lingering shots after characters exit the frame in *Elephant* suggest an impersonal or transpersonal perspective (Scott, para. 25). For Scott, this does not constitute an approximation of "the big picture"; rather, it signifies an enigmatic disconnect (Scott, para. 25). The perspective of Humbert's mythical descriptions of Lolita as nymphet is transpersonal in the sense that Lolita is incorporated in Humbert's symbolic universe. The incorporation, of course, is disconnected from reality. If, as I have suggested, Lolita's first appearance is filmed from behind or in between trees or bushes, providing Lolita with a setting akin to that of a butterfly, then the camera's lingering after Lolita has left the shot would suggest a transpersonal perspective that is disconnected from reality.

At one point in *Elephant*, the camera tracks Michelle from behind until she enters the school's gymnasium. The next shot is static, capturing Michelle as she advances from the back of the gymnasium, to a mystical soundtrack of birds chirping, chimes, and high frequency feedback. The soundtrack is unaffected as Michelle advances from afar, alluding to a presence that is not a character. Much later, the end credits roll over a fast motion shot of a descending sun through clearing skies, set to a blend of "Für Elise" and the ethereal soundscape of the gymnasium scene, with the occasional geese in flight thrown in. The accumulative effect is to sustain a sense of wonder and suspended reality. An ethereal soundtrack applied to the garden scene outlined in the previous paragraph, and re-applied for other representations of Lolita mythologized, would similarly invoke a sense of disconnect from reality.

*Elephant*, Scott observes, does not conform to conventional notions of cause and effect; rather, the film's lack of prescribed moral reactions or clear motives for the killings plays on audience expectations and the desire to make meaning, forcing the viewer to become aware of his or her own readiness to draw uncertain conclusions (Scott, para. 3,52). By not lending the boys more emotional weight than any of the other characters, Scott holds, Van Sant promotes detachment, as well as a certain compassion (Scott, para. 51). Whereas Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* is ideologically saturated, securing the prescribed leftist audience in a familiar and comfortable position of the good guys against the bad guys, the political right and gun-lobbying groups, *Elephant* resists moral or emotional alignments (Scott, para. 12-14)

In an earlier scene, as Alex and Eric are having breakfast, the following exchange takes place:

Alex: What's that smell?

Eric: (laughs through his nose) Ah, that's just your mom.

Alex' mother: You know, you could find other places to eat. I'm sure there's (sic) better restaurants in town.

Eric: Naw, you're the best. (*Elephant*)

The teasing, light-hearted moment, a rarity in the movie, points to a reasonably healthy, normal home environment. In the following shot, the boys watch a television programme about Nazism, with what appears to be only moderate interest. The final flashback starts off with a static shot of Alex entering the shower. Shortly after, Eric joins Alex, saying: "I guess this is it. We're gonna die today" (*Elephant*). The casual observation about impending death is eerie. Eric goes on to say: "Yeah... I've never even kissed anybody. Have you?" (*Elephant*). Then, they gently kiss, with Alex holding on to Eric's arm. As well as being a testament to their emotional innocence, the kiss may hint at homosexuality.

Some critics, like Foundas, have found the shower scene, the "penultimate moment" before the boys carry out the school massacre, uncomfortable (Foundas 38), likely owing to Van Sant's history of obsessing over the mostly teen, male subjects of his films. In an interview with *BUTT* magazine, openly gay Van Sant admits to watching porn on the Internet (LaBruce 62). When interviewer Bruce LaBruce asks if there is anything particular that he looks for that turns him on, adding "Not to get you into any legal trouble...", Van Sant evades the question, answering that it all seems very uniform to him (LaBruce 63). LaBruce's aside, joke or not, suggests a perceived preference for young men, perhaps as young as the mostly teen subjects of Van Sant's films.

Andy Medhurst argues that gays, by being born into heterosexual culture experiences it, and consequently knows more about this culture's centre than the centre will ever know about its margins (Staiger 3). According to LaBruce, the late actor River Phoenix, who played a gay character in Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), and the late musician Kurt Cobain both identified with the outsidership of gay identity (LaBruce 68). In interviews, Waspy, middle-class Van Sant mostly poses himself as a voyeur to alien cultures that he nonetheless finds intriguing (Staiger 10). The apparently gay shower scene, then, may be intended as much to signal outsidership, as to empathize with the characters by infusing some of Van Sant's own characteristics, much like Nabokov does with Humbert.

As the massacre is about to start, the film camera is circling Alex until the film camera directly faces him, then intercuts to a reverse-shot of photography student Elias,



who lifts his photographic camera and takes a picture. On the click of the photographic camera, the scene intercuts back to Alex's face. The presence of the photographic camera brings attention to the presence of the film camera, with both facing Alex at this point (*Elephant*). Within seconds, Alex turns to Michelle and pulls the trigger. The camera; recording, immortalizing, is juxtaposed with the gun; killing, erasing. In *Lolita*, Humbert constantly brings attention to the writing process, and, as we will remember, he managed to preserve one Lolita for posterity, while erasing the other from her future.

Alex is tracked from the front, shooting, then hurrying down the hallway, trying to track down students that are still in the building. Reaching one of the exits, he reloads his gun while the camera circles him, and dryly delivers a famous line from Macbeth: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (*Elephant*). The line recalls Kant's description of the feeling of the sublime as alternating between attraction and repulsion (Shaw 46). According to Andy Klein of Citybeat, Van Sant's technique of prolonged tracking shots in the film's earlier scenes "flirts with boredom" (Klein 22). The Kantian sublime is, I hold, the exact opposite of boredom.

Alex and Eric, suggests Scott, try to break out of their prescribed realities through active nihilism; however, the heavy-duty army gear and careful mapping of the school make for an elaborate fantasy, mimicking a sniper video game, rather than authentic self-expression (Scott, para. 21, 23-24). As Žižek points out, virtual realities constitute a disconnection from authentic experience (Scott, para. 21), thus there is clearly irony at work in *Elephant*'s apocalyptic climax. Similarly, the crime-fiction quality in the build-up and mood of *Lolita* fails to reflect Humbert's expressed recognition of the substantial Lolita in the second half of the novel.

Although, as I have demonstrated, elements of *Lolita*'s narrative structure, such as focalization, translates to film, my contention is that embedding, where the narrator is an instrument of narrative mediation (Schmidt, para. 33), does not. For Schmidt, the difficulty of specifying the narrative process "reveals the limits of literary narrativity when applied to film studies" (Schmidt, para. 33). In the following, I will explore embedding in paintings by Bjarne Melgaard, with a view to re-imagine *Lolita*'s manifestations of sublime deceit in paint.

## JEALOUS

Following Bjarne Melgaard's move to New York City in 2008, his work is conceived as painted novels, featuring a number of photorealistic reproductions of photographs of Melgaard and his parents, taken from family albums, as well as other private photographs, and images from magazines (Kvaran 11). The latter, featuring young boys, sparked considerable debate, from here on referred to as the NAMBLA controversy.

In the essay "Rape and The City", John Kelsey describes Melgaard's recent paintings as the fragments of a novel-in-progress (Kelsey 15). Olsson notes how the scribbled messages have been a constant in Melgaard's art (Olsson, para. 3). However, as Iversen holds, small stories have replaced the one-liners, adding to a sense of intimacy (Iversen, para. 4). Unlike *Lolita*, Melgaard's paintings wear a degree of the artist's investment in their subject matter on their sleeves, figuratively speaking. The paintings, including the scribbled messages, are drawn/written by hand, and the family album photographs represent Melgaard's biography.

Twenty-four untitled paintings produced in New York in the course of the previous fifteen months were, according to Trude Schjeldrup Iversen of *Kunstkritikk*, the main focus of Bjarne Melgaard's 2010 retrospective exhibition *Jealous* at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art (Iversen, para. 1). A concurrent exhibition at Bergen Kunstmuseum, consisting of an additional twenty-four new works by the artist, bore the same title (Nilsson, para. 1), indicating that *Jealous* relates primarily to the 2009 paintings as a series.

In most cases, a photo provided by Melgaard will be projected onto a canvas, on which his assistants paint, reproducing the projection with a pre-determined degree of photorealism (Torstensen 19), amounting to what Olsson describes as a perversion of Andy Warhol's factory (Olsson, para. 3). The technique takes away from the artist's investment in the subject matter handled, as Melgaard takes himself out of the reproduction of this initial layer of his paintings. First, Melgaard establishes the subjects within the picture frame, then subjectively interferes with the initial drawing or reproduction, often more than once, reacting with increasing energy and emotional intensity, resulting in a sort of climactic or destructive art (Kvaran 12). Applied to narrative theory, Melgaard's technique can be best described as narrative framing. I will return to specific examples of narrative framing in *Jealous* below.

Most of the photographs of young boys are taken from collages by Renato Corraza, which were printed in the 1990s in the magazine *Made in The USA*, later distributed by NAMBLA; North American Man/Boy Love Association (Fuglehaug, para.

19), an organization wanting to legalize sex between men and boys (Kristensen, para. 4), whose members include evicted distributors of child pornography and sexual offenders (Fuglehaug, para. 8). The remainder of the photographs of young boys used by Melgaard were printed in the *NAMBLA bulletin* (Fuglehaug, para. 19).

Although Melgaard has not investigated who the photographed boys are, or how they wound up in the magazines, he claims, based on assessments made by his lawyers, that the production of the photographs do not involve illegal acts (Kristensen, para. 7). The photographs taken from the NAMBLA bulletin were all previously published in different contexts, e.g. mail order clothing catalogues (Bjerke, para. 5-6).

The reproduction of photographs used to promote paedophilia, regardless of whether the children depicted are victims of sexual abuse, arguably has ethical repercussions as Melgaard does not explicitly show, through mediation, that he rejects the promotion of paedophilia.

Melgaard holds that he approaches the photographs in a manner that is not comparable to their setting in the magazines (Kristensen, para. 5). In a 2010 interview with *Kunst*, Melgaard discusses an eroticizing aspect of the transition between child and adult that is not often discussed, but is all the more important in the forming of one's identity (Torstensen 22); an aspect that Mann's photography appears to capture.

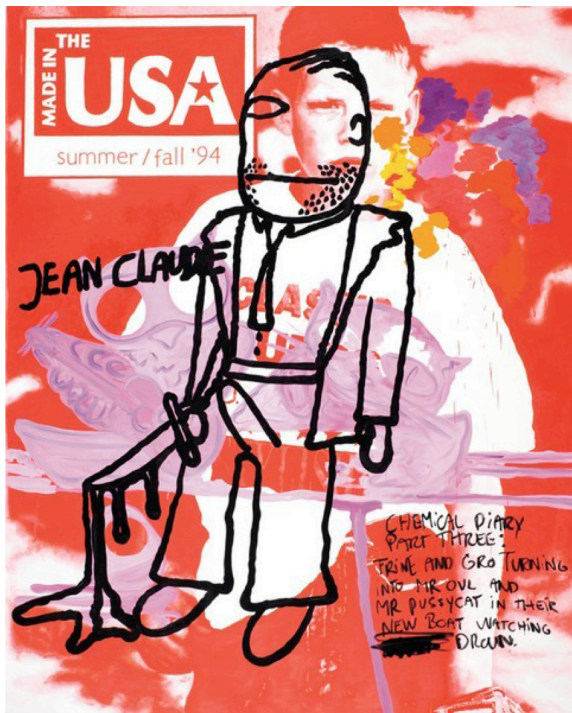


Fig. 4: Untitled (2009). Fig. 5: Untitled (2009). (Melgaard 76, 81)

In one painting from the *Jealous* series, *Untitled* (2009) (Melgaard 81), a photorealistic reproduction from *Made in The USA*, in red, features a young boy with an expression of self-assured defiance (see fig. 4, p. 75), reminiscent of the subjects in Mann's photographs. Drawn on top of the photorealistic reproduction and a second layer, in soft purple and orange tones, depicting an owl and a cat, a third layer, in black, depicts a man holding a bloody knife, who appears to share one eye with the boy, suggesting a connection between the boy and the man. This third layer also features a scribbled paragraph, bottom-right: "CHEMICAL DIARY / PART THREE: / TRINE AND GRO TURNING / INTO MR OUL (sic) AND / MR PUSSYCAT IN THEIR / NEW BOAT WATCHING / ... [crossed out] DROUN (sic)" (Melgaard 81). *Aftenposten*'s Jørgen Lund describes the tension, in Melgaard's art, between a magical atmosphere and destructive interventions (Ueland 25), as displayed in the juxtaposition of owl/kitten and man with bloody knife. Melgaard likes to contrast the attractive with the repulsive, warm delicate colours against cold subject matter, or a hard line against a softer one (Torstensen 20). An animal will frequently appear as a cute, childlike presence between syringes and lubricants (Olsson, para. 3).

In terms of narrative framing, the third layer of paint, Melgaard's second intervention, is situated at the extradiegetic level. The second layer, Melgaard's first intervention, is situated at the intradiegetic level. The first layer, the photorealistic reproduction, is situated at the metadiegetic level. Although the narrative hierarchy is clear, the nature of the narrator situated on each narrative level is less so. Although there are at least a photographer, a magazine editor, and one or more of Melgaard's assistants at work in the production and reproduction of the *Made in the USA* cover, it is the agent responsible for the gaze that is the narrator at work in the first layer of the painting. Accordingly, Melgaard, or an alter ego, appears to be the autodiegetic narrator on each narrative level. In a potential reworking of *Lolita* into a "painted novel", Charlotte, the metadiegetic narrator, would feature in the initial layer of the painting; literally writing her letter, or representing it metaphorically, i.e. figuratively or non-figuratively. Humbert, the intradiegetic narrator, would feature in a second layer; circling words and making comments, or representing his reactions metaphorically. John Ray, the extradiegetic narrator, would feature in a third layer; blotting out what he believes to be improper or unsuitable for publication.

The period from 2003 to 2008, when Melgaard lived in Berlin and Barcelona, is marked by an escalating use of drugs and steroids (Kvaran 11). At one point, Melgaard

consumed as much as twelve to fifteen grams of cocaine a day (Horvei, para. 28). In a 2011 article in *Plot*, Melgaard, commenting on his extensive steroid and cocaine abuse, reflects that he was a person who wanted to be near death (Ottosen, para. 3).<sup>16</sup> In Melgaard's art, I recognise this longing as the invocation of a Burkean sublime; when the mind reacts to the contemplation of terrifying objects, such as hell or death, by taking on some of their grandeur, thus producing, paradoxically, a sense of pleasure.

Olsson lists the drive to really get close to someone as one of Melgaard's foremost concerns (Olsson, para. 5), and the juxtapositions in his paintings somehow achieves this through negation. The outlines of Jean Claude and Bjarne (Melgaard 82), Jean Claude and penis (Melgaard 76), or, in other paintings, Bjarne flanked by dogs Trine and Gro (Melgaard 87,90), huddled together "above a Paris coke orgy" (Melgaard 76), or watching "American gymqueens" (Melgaard 90), appear as instances of tenderness in Melgaard's otherwise hardened settings of drug-infused, violent sexuality.

Art critic Ingvild Henmo, quoted by Ueland, notes how, when confronted with Melgaard's art, "the viewer is drawn to both voyeurism, to peep into the private, and the need for integrity, distance, overview" (Ueland 25). In his art, Melgaard appears simultaneously present and mediated (Wernø 46). In *Bjarne Melgaard - Jealous*, a companion film to the Melgaard retrospective at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Melgaard refers to his art as painting his fictional self, insisting that there is less of Melgaard the person in his art than most Norwegian critics seem to think (*Bjarne Melgaard - Jealous*). This, of course, is the expressed view of Melgaard the painter, corresponding to the writer, or author role, in Maingueneau's author typology, and may not coincide with what is perceived through the implied Melgaard and Melgaard the person.

In a second painting from the *Jealous* series, *Untitled* (2009) (see fig. 5, p. 75), the first of two blocks of text, bottom-left, reads: "CHEMICA (sic) / DIARY: / PARIS / FUCK ME AS YOUR / SON JEAN CLAUDE / 'OH YEAH' HE SAYS AND / PUNCH (sic) HIM IN THE / CHEST" (Melgaard 76). In an interview in *SMUG*, Melgaard confesses that he frequents Daddyhunt, a gay dating website in which the member seeks a "hunter", a sort of son, or a "daddy", a sort of father figure (Horvei, para. 39). Although he, according to the reporter, tries to meet a new "hunter" every night, Melgaard adds that

---

<sup>16</sup> - Jeg tror jeg var en person som ville være nær døden. (qtd. in Ottosen, para. 3). I use "near death" to preserve the ambiguity between "close to death" and "closeness to death".

he “hates children”, and that he does not like young men (Horvei, para. 41). Yet inevitably, a possible link between Melgaard’s father-son fetish and the reproduction of photographs used to promote paedophilia must be considered.

Melgaard considers “the complete right to have a fantasy world without any borders” to be fundamental to him (Mogutin 63). According to Kvaran, Melgaard “challenges boundaries and conventions in the name of personal, absolute freedom” (Kvaran 12). He holds that endorsement of sexual behaviour that transgresses social norms is a constant in Melgaard’s output (Kvaran 12). However, Melgaard does not explicitly venture beyond the realm of fantasy in his paintings, except, perhaps, where the photorealistic reproductions are concerned.

When asked in the “Safari” programme whether he sympathizes with an organisation like NAMBLA, who advocates legalization of sex between men and boys, Melgaard replies that he does not sympathise very much with any political organization, but that he nonetheless invokes the right to be able to reflect upon their work (Kristensen, para. 14-15). Melgaard does prominently feature the logo of the magazine in which the boys are depicted, suggesting that the paedophile aspect forms part of his motive for including the reproductions. Is Melgaard normalizing and perpetuating ethically irresponsible acts by not interjecting a mediating presence that guides the viewer to respond negatively to the photographs? When a work of art unambiguously prescribes the viewer’s moral response, then surely, as is my position with regards to *Lolita*, some of its ability to transform is lost.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In the problem statement, my fourth research question reads: *what, if any, aspects of Lolita the novel’s treatment of the sublime cannot easily or effectively be transferred to other art forms?* It is the last of four questions relating to what I consider to be the foremost ethical concerns that *Lolita*, the novel, raises.

Kubrick’s and Lyne’s film adaptations of *Lolita* largely represent a realist reading of the novel, with a 14-year-old, seductive Lolita, a controlling, pathetic Charlotte, and a fully realised Quilty. As a result, the novel’s central themes of narrative deception and the sublimation of paedophilia are effectively sidestepped.

Riefenstahl’s documentary film *Triumph of the Will*, arguably more Nazi propaganda than documentary, raises ethical concerns about the sublimation of Nazism,

achieved largely through personification and build-up of momentum. A film adaptation of *Lolita* could benefit from drawing on *Triumph of the Will*'s all-permeating sense of the sublime in scenes where Lolita is the centre of attention, using personification of inanimate objects and setting.

Van Sant's *Elephant*, a fictional re-creation of the Columbine high school massacre, raises ethical concerns about the sublimation of active nihilism. A film adaptation of *Lolita* could benefit from drawing on *Elephant*'s taking on the perspective of various characters, by using wide-angle shots to approximate focalization on Humbert the narrator, and tracking shots that take on some aspects of Humbert the character's sensual experience to approximate dual focalization. Subjective camera, where the camera stands in for the character's gaze, could represent focalization on Humbert the character. An enigmatic disconnect from reality, with the sense that Lolita as nymphet is incorporated in Humbert's symbolic universe, could be achieved with the camera's lingering after Lolita has left a shot, along with the application of an ethereal soundtrack.

Although, as I have argued, sublimation and elements of *Lolita*'s narrative structure, such as focalization, translates to film, embedding, where the narrator is an instrument of narrative mediation, appears not to.

Like *Lolita*, Melgaard's 2009 series of paintings *Jealous* raises ethical concerns about its apparent sublimation of paedophilia. A painted version of *Lolita* could benefit from drawing on Melgaard's narrative framing, achieved by successive layers of paint. Charlotte's letter, realistically represented, then subjected to Humbert's tampering, in the form of circled words and scribbled comments, could in turn be edited by John Ray, with the blotting out of whatever he considers improper, or otherwise unsuitable for publication.

Conceivably, as I have demonstrated, the ambiguous affinity between author and protagonist in *Lolita*, the narrative strategies of focalization and embedding, and the novel's manifestations of the sublime may all, to some extent, be realized in other disciplines. In some cases, adaptations to film or painting may provide meaningful visualization of literal devices. However, the possibilities I have outlined may often feel strained or contrived when compared to their seamless integration in literature. More importantly, visual adaptations appear forced to make interpretive choices that effectively eliminate the intrinsic unreliability of textual narration.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

First and foremost, this final chapter will present a summary of my findings, developed further by means of comparative notes, and a return to the problem. Second, I will briefly review the project in terms of development and results. Finally, I will suggest some possibilities for further development of the project.

In the introduction to the thesis, I stated the following problem: *manifestations of the sublime in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita are conditioned by narrative strategies within the text, specific to literature, and their ethical repercussions are intimately tied to the discursive positioning of the author*. To address the problem statement, I devised four research questions. The ambition of the thesis has been to enable forceful articulation of what it is that, to my mind, sets *Lolita* apart as a great work of art. My argument rests on a definition of the sublime that simultaneously confronts and unites aesthetics and ethics.

The first research question, related to the discursive positioning of the author, reads: *to what degree does Nabokov and Humbert Humbert become one in the telling of Lolita?*

Neither the statements of Nabokov the writer, the author on the literary stage, nor Nabokov's biography, attest to or reveal any degree of affinity with Humbert's paedophile tendencies. The background, education and itinerary of Nabokov the person, on the other hand, along with the wit, intelligence and style of Nabokov the writer, appear to resemble closely the history and characteristics of Humbert. Significantly, Humbert's nymphet myth appears to have borrowed from Nabokov's passion for butterflies. Much like he claims, Nabokov, as an exercise in empathy with the paedophile predator, appears to have fashioned Humbert as a partly realised alter ego. However, Nabokov's extensive handling of variations on the theme of paedophilia points to something beyond a passing interest.

From the wealth of intertextual references in *Lolita*, I chose to focus on the example of the assumed paedophile Lewis Carroll, as he and the Alice books permeate the novel on the level of both text and discourse. I hold that Lewis Carroll's permeating intertextual presence in *Lolita*, which is remarkable for going beyond his books, has been largely overlooked in the criticism of the novel. The variety of connections certainly attests to



Nabokov's respect for Carroll's work, but also indicates either affinity with, or a fascination with, Carroll's assumed paedophile tendencies.

The persistent anxiety over child abuse, along with intertextual reverberations such as Mann's photography, continue to unsettle our perception of the relationship between Nabokov and his character-narrator Humbert. Sally Mann's photography, in which her children mimic the adult world, plays into *Lolita* the discourse by establishing as probable the reality of Lolita's advances, while discrediting the sexual intent as Humbert's projection. The continual perceived ambiguity between Nabokov as person and writer, and *Lolita*'s implied Nabokov, with allusions to Lewis Carroll, effectively fails to prescribe the reader's moral reaction, which forces him or her to activate his or her own faculty of judgement.

The second research question, related to the narrative of *Lolita*, reads: *how does the narrative structure of Lolita affect the reliability of its main protagonist Humbert Humbert?*

Understanding *Lolita*'s narrative hierarchy is central to decide the reliability of Humbert within this structure. The extradiegetic narrator John Ray, Jr. functions as both editor and guarantor of the intradiegetic narrator Humbert, whose narrative is embedded in Ray's narrative. In turn, Humbert functions as both editor and guarantor of the metadiegetic narrator Charlotte, as Humbert is the one relating her letter. Whereas Ray's editing appears to be only minimal, merely affirming the accuracy of Humbert's accounts, Humbert heavy-handedly edits and alters Charlotte's narrative to correspond with his projected image of her. Consequently, Humbert's reliability is strengthened on all narrative levels.

The passages where Humbert the narrator reports not only what Humbert the character experiences but also what Humbert the narrator retrospectively thinks of these experiences adds a level of reflection that ultimately strengthens his reliability. The act of telling appears to confront Humbert with the severity of his actions, adding an implied story about the ethical struggle of Humbert the narrator.

A discrepancy in the story timeline, hidden in the meticulous accounts of dates and events, relegates Lolita's letter, the visit to the pregnant Lolita and the murder of Quilty to the realm of fantasy. This reading is supported by various clues in the text, such as Quilty's shadowy existence throughout the novel, Humbert's unlikely adulation of the pregnant Lolita, and the heightened melodrama of said sequences. As Ray is party to the timeline discrepancy, he must logically be Humbert's creation; this reading is supported by

Humbertian phrases within the foreword, as well as by Humbert's melodramatic digressions in which he addresses his lawyer or printer as additional guarantors of the intradiegetic level of the memoir. Humbert's strategy has been to inflate his reliability by passing himself off as being at the mercy of editing, when in fact he is in total control. The loss of the extradiegetic level, along with the awareness of Humbert's narrative deception, severely weaken Humbert's reliability, both as narrator and as the editor of Charlotte's letter.

I disagree with Phelan's assumption that Humbert's aesthetic control is only partly successful, as it devalues Humbert's considerable achievement in having the reader empathize with acts that he or she knows, even while reading, to be ethically unsound. If, as I suggest, Humbert consciously sets himself up to be caught out by the "artist reader" by means of clues hidden in the details, Humbert effectively privileges aesthetics over ethics. Nabokov the writer's description of Humbert as vain and cruel, and my position that the discrepancy in the story timeline is Humbert's design, support my predilection to regard Humbert as a fully realised as a self-conscious narrator.

The recount thus far has reiterated that *Lolita* is told predominantly from the perspective of Humbert, to a degree beyond what is superficially perceived. Many of Nabokov's attributes and attitudes reflect those of Humbert. Although Nabokov's expressed and perceived ambition is to stage an exercise in empathy, the career author's extensive investment in the subject matter of paedophilia suggests an interest that goes beyond curiosity.

The third research question, related to the novel's central nymphet myth, reads: *what are the ethical implications of apparent manifestations of the sublime in Lolita?*

There are a number of ways in which Humbert generates and maintains the myth that he has created for the Lolita of his obsession. Whether describing Lolita, or conjured from inanimate objects or setting as an imaginary response to her presence, the foremost effect of the sublimation is to seduce the reader into emphatically taking on the perspective of a paedophile.

Humbert uses a number of devices to seduce the reader, including flattery and the promise of transcendence. While the former is realized by presenting nymphet love as recognizable only by artists and intellectuals, the latter is conjured by introducing an element of danger into the descriptions of the everyday, such as the shadowy existence of Quilty, or the contemplation of murder.

Applied to Lacan's theory of the Imaginary, Humbert desires Lolita's incorporation into his subjective universe, a desire that the reader may recognize as inherent in human love. Through sublimation, Humbert can seduce the reader in a way that descriptions of Lolita in her twelve-year-old substance cannot. At the same time, Humbert appears to be a victim of his own deception by continually pursuing the impossible object of his passion to the edge of the abyss. In a sense, though, that pursuit is the only means by which Humbert may attain oneness with the beloved object, namely in the shared immortality of literature.

Humbert's perpetuation of the nymphet myth appears to be a deliberate strategy that falls neatly into a pattern of deceit suggested by the apparently deceptive narrative hierarchy. The continued ambiguity with regard to the author's affinity with Humbert forces the reader to activate his or her own faculty of judgement, especially when confronted with manifestations of the sublime.

The fourth research question addressing the intrinsic value of literature, reads: *what, if any, aspects of Lolita the novel's treatment of the sublime cannot easily or effectively be transferred to other art forms?*

The existing film adaptations of *Lolita*, directed by Kubrick and Lyne respectively, largely represent a realist reading of the novel, with the characters resembling closely Humbert's projections of them. As such, they disregard the subtext of narrative unreliability that permeates the novel. In addition, with the title character now a 14-year-old sort of femme fatale, the subject matter of paedophilia is effectively sidestepped.

Riefenstahl's documentary film *Triumph of the Will* and Van Sant's feature film *Elephant* appear to stand in causal chains of events leading up to the Holocaust and the Red Lake High School Massacre respectively. In the former, sublimation of the film's subject matter of Nazism is achieved through personification and build-up of momentum. A film adaptation of *Lolita* could draw on *Triumph of the Will*'s all-permeating sense of the sublime by using personification of inanimate objects and setting in scenes where Lolita is the centre of attention. In *Elephant*, sublimation of active nihilism is achieved by conjuring a sense of wonder and suspended reality. A film adaptation of *Lolita* could draw on *Elephant*'s approach to perspective by using tracking shots that take on some aspects of Humbert the character's sensual experience to approximate dual focalization. A sense of Lolita as beloved object, incorporated in Humbert's symbolic universe, could be achieved with the camera's lingering after Lolita has left a shot, signifying an enigmatic disconnect from reality.

Melgaard's 2009 series of paintings *Jealous* raises ethical concerns about this work's apparent sublimation of paedophilia. A painted version of *Lolita* could employ Melgaard's successive layers of paint to construct an approximation of narrative framing. The first layer of paint should feature one of the reproduced or simulated texts embedded in Humbert's narrative, whereas the second and third layers should feature Humbert's and John Ray's interventions respectively. In addition, having the author paint would implicate an ambiguous degree of affinity between author and narrator.

Although, as I have argued, sublimation and elements of *Lolita*'s narrative structure, such as focalization, do translate to film, embedding, where the narrator is an instrument of narrative mediation, appears not to do so.

Conceivably, the ambiguous affinity between author and protagonist in *Lolita*, the narrative strategies of focalization and embedding, and the novel's manifestations of the sublime could be adapted to other art forms. On the plus side, adaptation may provide new insights by amplifying, reducing, or transforming aspects of the original work. On the minus side, what is seamlessly integrated in its native form, such as narrative strategies in literature, may appear strained or contrived in other transformations.

Importantly, the intrinsic unreliability that is a feature of all textual narration, and that I hold to capture the essence of *Lolita*, has not been addressed in my discussion. Although we might conceive of meta-film, such as Fellini's *8 1/2*, as capable of retaining in adaptation a semblance of this feature, my notion is that such efforts would ultimately exhibit a degree of strain or contrivance when removed from their original form.

At this point, I would like to draw some comparative lines that unite the research questions and address the problem more directly. In the problem statement, I indicated that my discussion would counter Phelan's privileging of ethics over aesthetics. I reiterate that the concern of the thesis is with the ethics of the telling, rather than the ethics of the subject matter of paedophilia. Riefenstahl demonstrates the rewards and dangers of resisting to state her position with regard to the ethically charged subject matter handled. Had she admitted to her apparent Nazi sympathies, the film would not still have been widely regarded as a masterpiece. Although Nabokov, like Riefenstahl, does not explicitly show that he rejects paedophilia or its promotion, my discussion reveals that unlike Riefenstahl, he does so implicitly – in the details of both the novel and his statements on the literary stage.

In my presentation of *Lolita*, I refer to Nabokov the writer's declaration in the afterword to the novel that its object is to afford "aesthetic bliss". However, as my

discussion has demonstrated, the statement is deceptive. I conclude that the sublimation of paedophilia entails a self-evident juxtaposition of aesthetics and ethics that clearly calls into question the autonomy of judgement. The glimpses of the substantial *Lolita* reveal Humbert's conjuring to be an act of deception. Moreover, I hold that the discrepancy reading, which effectively reshuffles the narrative hierarchy of the novel, profoundly affects the reliability of Humbert. Alas, Humbert's deception, only uncoverable by "caressing the details", is two-fold. The ambiguity of the author's intention sits the responsibility of judgement squarely in the reader's lap. Finally, I hold that the foremost achievement of Nabokov's *Lolita* is to demonstrate the dangerous beauty of literature, in an act of deception that is truly sublime.

I initially approached *Lolita* from the position of wanting to account for the continued appeal of *Lolita*, more than half a century after its publication. I soon circled in on the sublime, and the meeting of aesthetics and ethics that it embodies, as a point of entry. My assumption, from a poststructuralist perspective, was that the balance between aesthetics and ethics in *Lolita* is conditioned by the discourse as much as by the text. I have identified the author as the dominant voice in the discourse, and the narrator as the dominant voice in the text. Discussing the discourse, I have identified the author's apparent affinity with his character-narrator as the conditioning aspect. Finally, in the context of a literary analysis, I have explored the particularities of literature as a vessel for the sublime. My findings have significantly shifted and enriched the way I regard *Lolita*, from the theme of the novel to the complicated web of ambiguity and deception that conditions its sublime manifestations.

My discussion has continually led me to new areas of interest, much of which is beyond the scope of the thesis. In closing, I will suggest some possibilities for further development of the project.

My research on focalization led me to suggest amendments to Phelan's and Genette's typologies. I also propose a hierarchy of subtypes of focalization within a diegetic level. Going forward, more focused, extensive research on the field may enable me to develop and introduce a more fully realized amendment to focalization theory.

As mentioned in the theory presentation, I find Lacan's terminology related to the Imaginary immensely helpful. However, owing to my otherwise ambiguous feelings towards Lacan's work, I believe that more extensive research into his work, including the objections of his detractors, could serve to rescue useful theory that might otherwise be lost as part of a rejection of Lacan wholesale.

Finally, my findings may conceivably be applied to creative writing. A subject matter that immediately comes to mind is the Utøya Massacre of 2011. While I am conscious of the enormous difference, in scope and consequence, between Anders Behring Breivik's and Humbert's crimes, I remain convinced that engaging with the drives of the perpetrator may provide valuable insights, whereas total disassociation would not. My feeling is that an exercise in empathy, implicitly mediated to guide the reader to awareness of the narrator's unreliability, in terms of underreporting, misreporting, and misregarding, could be achieved while ensuring the necessary sensitivity to the subject matter.

## Bibliography

- "1947 Calendar". *Calendar Donkey*. <1947.calendardonkey.com>. Consulted 27.10.2011.
- "1949 Calendar". *Calendar Donkey*. <1949.calendardonkey.com>. Consulted 27.10.2011.
- Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009.
- Anderson, Sam. "A Glorious Mess". *New York Magazine*. 15.11.2009. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://nymag.com/arts/books/reviews/62036/>>.
- Bader, Julia. *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.
- Bal, Mieke. "Narration and Focalization". In Ed. Mieke Bal. *Narrative Theory: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies, Volume 1: Major Issues in Narrative Theory*. Routledge, 1991. Pp. 263-96.
- . "The Laughing Mice: Or: On Focalization". *Poetics Today*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Narratology III: Narration and Perspective in Fiction, Winter, 1981. Pp. 202-10.
- Bancroft, Colette. "Catching up with Lolita, 50 years later". *Tampa Bay Times*, August 10, 2008. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://www.tampabay.com/features/books/article759975.ece>>.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author". *Athenaeum Library of Philosophy*. 1967. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/barthes06.htm>>.
- Bjarne Melgaard - *Jealous*. Dir. Lars E. Skageberg. Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, 2010. Retrieved online 27.10.2011. <<http://vimeo.com/13177526>>.
- Bjerke, Mona Pahle. "Mørk ekstase". *NRK*. 22.01.2010. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://www.nrk.no/kultur-og-underholdning/1.6957187>>.
- Busack, Richard von. "Lingering 'Lolita'". *Metroactive*. 27.03.1997. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/03.27.97/lolita-9713.html>>.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through The Looking-Glass*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1998.
- Clancy, Laurie. *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. London: Macmillan, 1984.
- Close Up. CBS. New York. 19.11.1958. Retrieved online 27.04.2011. <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ldpj\\_5JNFoA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ldpj_5JNFoA)>.
- Cohen, Morton N. *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*. London: Macmillan, 1995.
- Cornwell, Neil. *Vladimir Nabokov*. Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999.
- Coste, Didier and John Pier. "Narrative Levels". *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg University Press, 04.08.2011. Consulted 27.10.2011. <[http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narrative\\_Levels](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narrative_Levels)>.
- Deveraux, Mary. "Beauty and evil: the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*". In Ed. Jerrold Levinson. *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the intersection*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. 227-56.
- Dragunoiu, Dana. "Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*: Art, Deception, Ethics". *Contemporary Literature*. Volume 46, Number 2, Summer 2005. University of Wisconsin Press. Pp. 311-39.

- Durantaye, Leland de la. *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010.
- Duyfhuizen, Bernard. "Framed Narrative". In Eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, Marie-Laure Ryan. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Pp. 186-88.
- Elephant*. Dir. Gus Van Sant. SEG, 2004. Dvd.
- Engelstad, Anne and Elise Seip Tønnesen. *Film – en innføring*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2011.
- "The Federal Eagle". Deutscher Bundestag.  
<[http://www.bundestag.de/htdocs\\_e/bundestag/symbols/eagle/index.html](http://www.bundestag.de/htdocs_e/bundestag/symbols/eagle/index.html)>.  
Consulted 27.10.2011.
- Fenigstein, Allan. "Paranoia". In Ed. Howard S. Friedman. *Encyclopedia of Mental Health*. New York: Academic Press, 1998. Pp. 83-92.
- Ferguson, Liz. "FIFA 2012: Bert Stern: Original Madman". *Montreal Gazette*. March 23, 2012. <<http://blogs.montrealgazette.com/2012/03/23/fifa-2012-bert-stern-original-madman/>>. Consulted 20.04.2012.
- Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?". In Ed. James D. Faubion. *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Volume Two*. London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1998. Pp. 205-22.
- Foundas, Scott. "Elephant boys". *LA Weekly*. October 24-30, 2003. Pp. 38.
- Fuglehaug, Randi. "Kunstjunkien". *Dagbladet*, 27.04.2009. Consulted 20.04.2012.  
<[http://www.dagbladet.no/2009/04/27/magasinet/portrettet/kunst/bjarne\\_melgaard/5940741/](http://www.dagbladet.no/2009/04/27/magasinet/portrettet/kunst/bjarne_melgaard/5940741/)>.
- Gold, Herbert. "Vladimir Nabokov, The Art of Fiction No. 40". *The Paris Review*. 1967. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4310/the-art-of-fiction-no-40-vladimir-nabokov>>.
- Goring, Paul, Jeremy Hawthorn, and Domhnall Mitchell. *Studying Literature*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010.
- Grossman, Lev and Richard Lacayo. "All-TIME 100 Novels: Critics Lev Grossman and Richard Lacayo pick the 100 best English-language novels published since 1923 – the beginning of TIME". *TIME*. Oct. 16, 2005. Consulted 27.04.2011.  
<<http://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/#lolita-1955-by-vladimir-nabokov>>.
- Guiliano, Edward. "Lewis Carroll as Photographer: A Series of Photographs of Young Girls". In Ed. Edward Guiliano. *Lewis Carroll Observed: A Collection of Unpublished Photographs, Drawings, Poetry, and New Essays*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1976.
- Horvei, Maria Torkilsen. "Intervju: Bjarne Melgaard". *SMUG*, #2, 2009. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://www.smuglesning.no/post.aspx?ID=6412>>.
- Hyde, G. M. *Vladimir Nabokov: America's Russian Novelist*. London: Marion Boyars, 1977.
- Iversen, Trude Schjeldrup. "Melgaards kamp". *Kunstkritikk*, 22.01.2010. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://www.kunstkritikk.no/kritikk/melgaards-kamp/>>.
- Kelly, James. "TIME's List of the 100 Best Novels". *TIME*. Oct. 16, 2005. Consulted 27.04.2011.  
<[http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1951793\\_1952018\\_1952023,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1951793_1952018_1952023,00.html)>.
- Kelsey, John. "Rape and The City". Bjarne Melgaard. *Jealous*. Oslo: Astrup Fearnley, 2010. Pp. 13-16.



- Klein, Andy. "Schools of Thought: Columbine-inspired 'Elephant' and French doc 'To Be and to Have' employ realism to vastly different effects". *Citybeat*. October 23-29, 2003. Pp. 22.
- Kristensen, Eivind and Randi Fuglehaug. "Lager kunst av pedofili-bilder". *Dagbladet*, 14.04.2009. Consulted 27.04.2011.  
<[http://www.dagbladet.no/2009/04/14/kultur/bjarne\\_melgaard/kunst/5733896/](http://www.dagbladet.no/2009/04/14/kultur/bjarne_melgaard/kunst/5733896/)>.
- Kvaran, Gunnar B. "Bjarne Melgaard – Jealous". In Bjarne Melgaard. *Jealous*. Oslo: Astrup Fearnley, 2010. Pp. 9-12.
- LaBruce, Bruce. "Gus Van Sant Famous Film Director From Portland Owns Exactly One Porn Video". In Eds. Jop van Bennekom and Gert Jonkers. *BUTT BOOK: The Best of the first 5 Years of BUTT Magazine*. Cologne: Taschen, 2006. Pp. 60-68.
- Maingueneau, Dominique and Johannes Angermüller. "Discourse Analysis in France: A Conversation". *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. Volume 8, No. 2, Art. 21, May 2007. Pp. (no pagination).
- Melgaard, Bjarne. *Jealous*. Oslo: Astrup Fearnley, 2010.
- "mirabile dictum". In Eds. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 911.
- Mogutin, Slava. "Bjarne Melgaard Norwegian Hulk Makes Brutal Homo-Sexualist Art". *BUTT*, #16, 2006, pp. 57-64.
- Mulholland Drive*. Dir. David Lynch. Universal Studios Home Video, 2002. Dvd.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. USA: Vintage International, 1997.
- . *The Original of Laura*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.
- Naremore, James. *More Than Night: Film Noir In Its Contexts*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.
- Nathan, John. "Review: Lolita". *The Jewish Chronicle*. 10.09.2009. Consulted 27.04.2011.  
<<http://www.thejc.com/arts/theatre-reviews/review-lolita>>.
- Niederhoff, Bernard. "Focalization". *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg University Press, 04.08.2011. Consulted 27.10.2011. <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Focalization>>.
- Nilsson, Ørjan. "Kontroversielle bilder". *Byavisen*, 23.02.2010. Consulted 27.10.2011.  
<<http://byavisen.net/2010/02/kultur/kontroversielle-bilder>>.
- Olsson, Tommy. "Antydning til panikkangst". *Morgenbladet*, 29.01.2010. Consulted 27.10.2011. <[http://morgenbladet.no/kultur/2010/antydning\\_til\\_panikkangst](http://morgenbladet.no/kultur/2010/antydning_til_panikkangst)>.
- Ottosen, Peder. "Fra sexklubb til professor". *Dagbladet*, 06.04.2011. Consulted 27.10.2011.  
<[http://www.dagbladet.no/2011/04/06/kultur/kunst/utstilling/bjarne\\_melgaard/venezi-a-biennalen/16093900/](http://www.dagbladet.no/2011/04/06/kultur/kunst/utstilling/bjarne_melgaard/venezi-a-biennalen/16093900/)>.
- Phelan, James. *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Phillips, Christopher. "Resurrecting Vision: The New Photography in Europe Between the Wars". In Eds. Maria Morris Hambourg and Christopher Phillips. *The New Vision: Photography Between the Wars*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989. Pp. 65-111.
- Pier, John. "Metalepsis". In Eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, Marie-Laure Ryan. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Pp. 303-4.
- Prioleau, Elizabeth. "Humbert Humbert Through the Looking Glass". *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1975. Pp. 428-37.

- Regard, Frédéric. "Humanism Restylized: Salman Rushdie, the *Fatwa*, and the Resurrection of the Author". In Eds. Alex Stähler and Klaus Stierstorfer. *Writing Fundamentalism*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
- Richardson, Ben. "Controversial film 'The School' brings to life the heartbreaking story of the Beslan Siege". *Examiner*. 17.01.2010. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://www.examiner.com/article/controversial-film-the-school-brings-to-life-the-heartbreaking-story-of-the-beslan-siege>>.
- Rowe, William Woodin. *Nabokov's Deceptive World*. New York: New York University Press, 1971.
- Schmid, Wolf. "Implied Author". *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg University Press, 28.08.2011. Consulted 27.10.2011. <[http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Implied\\_Author](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Implied_Author)>.
- Schmidt, Johann N. "Narration in Film". *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg University Press, 02.12.2011. Consulted 20.04.2012. <[http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narration\\_in\\_Film](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narration_in_Film)>.
- Scott, Neera. "Sublime Anarchy in Gus Van Sant's Elephant". *Senses of Cinema*, vol:36, 2005. Pp. (no pagination).
- Schuman, Samuel. "*Lolita*: Novel and Screenplay". *College Literature*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1978. Pp. 195-204.
- Shaw, Philip. *The Sublime*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Staiger, Janet. "Authorship Studies and Gus Van Sant". *Film Criticism*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2004. Pp. 1-22.
- Stam, Robert. "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation". In Ed. James Naremore. *Film Adaptation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000. Pp. 54-76.
- Torstensen, Mette Dybwad. "Bjarne Melgaard: kunstneren og tegneren bak tabloidoverskriftene". *KUNST*, No. 3, 2010. Pp. 18-22.
- Triumph of the Will*. Dir. Leni Riefenstahl. Demand, 2008. Dvd.
- Ueland, Hanne Beate (2010) "Disgust and Admiration. Bjarne Melgaard in the Norwegian Media 1994-2009". In Bjarne Melgaard. *Jealous*. Oslo: Astrup Fearnley. Pp. 21-27.
- Wernøe, Johanne Nordby. "Seksten overskridende år". *Billedkunst*, 1:2010. Pp. 46.
- Wood, Michael. *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the risks of fiction*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.
- Woodward, Richard B. "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann". *New York Times*. 27.09.1992. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/27/magazine/the-disturbing-photography-of-sally-mann.html>>.
- Wurtzel, Elizabeth. *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*. London: Quartet Books, 1998. Retrieved online 27.10.2011. <<http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0698/wurtzel/excerpt.html>>.
- Yates, Robert. "The Observer Profile: Trouble With Girls; Jeremy Irons, Courting Controversy". *The Observer*. 26.04.1998. Consulted 27.04.2011. <<http://www.jeremy-irons.com/press/archive/10.html>>.
- Østenstad, Inger. *Hvorfor så stor? En litterær diskursanalyse av Dag Solstads forfatterskap*. Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, 2009.